

**Wednesday
14 March 2018**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 14 March 2018

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Severn Growth Summit

1. **Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): What steps he is taking to expand the economic links between south Wales and the south-west of England as a result of the Severn Growth Summit. [904274]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Llefarydd. Growth corridors are an important element of the industrial strategy for Wales. We are responding to local demand, building on the work undertaken by the great western cities and creating a great western powerhouse. We want to see the skills and expertise of this important region recognised across the UK and internationally.

Michelle Donelan: Does the Minister agree that scrapping the tolls on the Severn crossing—a commitment made by this Conservative Government—will prove an economic catalyst for further investment and significantly expand the links between south Wales and the south-west?

Stuart Andrew: I certainly welcome the abolition of the Severn tolls. It sends a powerful message that we are keen on this economic corridor. It will, I hope, bring about investment for the rest of south Wales, and it will save the average motorist around £1,400 per year.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My constituents want to be able to access work in the south-west, but despite it being plain that demand for rail services is going to grow and grow locally, there are still too few carriages, overcrowding and unreliable rail services. Will the Minister personally talk to Great Western about that?

Stuart Andrew: We are going through a consultation at the moment, and I hope the hon. Lady's constituents will take part in that. We recognise that investment in rail is important. That is why this Government are investing more than we have done as a country since the Victorian era. The new intercity express programme trains are an investment of more than £5.7 billion, and I hope she will welcome that positive news.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): South Wales is one of the key markets for Torbay's holiday companies and industry. Will the Minister look at improving the direct rail link between Cardiff and Paignton? In particular, will he raise issues with Great Western about the provision of refreshments on that service? At the moment, there are none throughout the whole journey.

Stuart Andrew: I would say that Wales is a good place for my hon. Friend's constituents to come and visit as a tourist destination, too. Of course we want to make sure that transport is as effective as possible, and we are in constant discussions about improving services. I will make sure we make that point about the food.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): One way that we could have real economic growth and jobs prospects for the whole region would be to deliver the tidal lagoon project. It has been more than 18 months since the Hendry review. Can I ask the Minister to get on with it and encourage the Secretary of State to start defending and standing up for Wales in the Cabinet?

Stuart Andrew: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State always stands up for Wales in Cabinet and does so very effectively. We are looking at the tidal lagoon carefully to ensure that it is value for money for the taxpayer, too.

Welsh EU Continuity Bill

2. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the proposal for a Welsh EU continuity Bill. [904275]

7. **Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the proposal for a Welsh EU continuity Bill. [904280]

11. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the proposal for a Welsh EU continuity Bill. [904284]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): As I have said previously, I do not think that the Welsh Government's continuity Bill is necessary. The UK Government want to reach agreement with the Welsh Government on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, with a view to securing the National Assembly's support for the legislation.

Alan Brown: Despite that answer, the reality is that on Friday, the Cabinet Office printed a list of 24 devolved competencies that the UK Government are going to snatch back from Wales and Scotland. That proves the need for a continuity Bill. Why is the Secretary of State not defending his devolved Parliament and standing up for it, instead of allowing this power grab?

Alun Cairns: My relationship with the First Minister and the Welsh Government is a positive one. We do not agree on everything, but we agree on the objective, which is to improve the outcomes for businesses and communities in Wales. There are 64 areas of the devolution settlement with Wales. There are 24 areas that we want to discuss further with the Welsh Government, to come to an agreement on how best to ensure that common rules apply across the UK, so that Welsh businesses are protected and can market their products across the rest of the UK.

Tommy Sheppard: Earlier this week, the long-awaited Government amendments to clause 11 of the EU (Withdrawal) Bill were published. Despite assurances

and promises, they were published without the consent, support or agreement of the devolved Administrations. Is it still the Government's policy to obtain the consent of the devolved Administrations? If further agreement is reached, will the Secretary of State bring forward further amendments?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is referring to amendments tabled to clause 11 in the other place. Commitments were made that amendments would be tabled, and that is exactly what we have done. If we had not tabled those amendments, we would have been criticised. As I have said in this Chamber and elsewhere, we are determined to work with the devolved Administrations to come to an agreement, but it is the UK Government that have the interest of looking after the whole UK. It is the UK Government that want to act in the interests of businesses and communities to ensure that a Scottish business can sell or buy products in Wales under the same regulations, where a common UK market matters.

David Linden: One of the reasons why continuity Bills have been brought forward is that there is no agreement in the Joint Ministerial Committee on this blatant Westminster power grab, but that has not stopped the UK Government pressing ahead anyway. Does the Secretary of State agree that no deal can be agreed on new powers unless there is agreement at the JMC?

Alun Cairns: I am hoping the agreement of the devolved Administrations will come as soon as possible. I am not going to tie it down to any one particular Joint Ministerial Committee meeting, but the one last week was another positive engagement between Administrations. I have been in this position before, when it was predicted that I would not get a legislative consent motion for the Wales Bill as it was progressing through Parliament. This can be done only by constant hard work and engagement, as well as optimism on both sides—acting in the interests of businesses and communities, not in the interests of politicians.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that not only is there not a power grab, but there will be a significant increase in powers to the devolved Administrations as Britain leaves the European Union?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is no intention of any power grab. Of the 64 areas that relate to Wales, we have already said that 30 will pass to the devolved Administration without the need for any further agreement, or at the very most only an informal agreement between the UK Government and them, but there are 24 areas in which it is in the interests of businesses in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as in England, to have common practices so that we can protect the UK market; 80% of Welsh output is sold to the rest of the UK.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Does the Secretary of State recall that Wales as a principality and the United Kingdom as a nation voted to leave the European Union and that, rather than talking about EU continuity, we should therefore be focusing on how to strike the

best deal for Britain on leaving the EU, particularly to be ready and prepared on day one at the Dover frontline?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman rightly points out that Wales voted to leave the European Union, and we have an obligation to act on that instruction from the referendum. This is also an opportunity to highlight that 80% of output from Wales goes to the rest of the UK, and Scotland sells four times more to the rest of the UK than it sells to the rest of the European Union. On that basis, protecting the UK market must be a priority, and acting in the interests of businesses and communities is our priority.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the advantages to Wales of having a common market across the whole United Kingdom?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Much focus is understandably and rightly placed on selling and trading with the European Union, but the most important market to Wales is the UK market—with eight out of 10 lorries of output from Wales and complex supply chains—and this is only right. Only two weeks ago, we recognised that the investment of Toyota in Derbyshire will have major positive impacts on the Toyota plant making engines on Deeside.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I am disappointed that the much-promised UK Government amendment to the power grab in clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, tabled by the right hon. Gentleman's Government in the House of Lords on Monday, states that UK Ministers will merely consult Welsh Government Ministers, not seek their consent. In so doing, his Government have changed the fundamental principle of the devolution settlement against the settled will of the people of Wales.

Alun Cairns: I do not recognise the statements made by the hon. Lady. The amendment tabled in the other place is a significant one. It recognises that powers automatically fall to the devolved Administrations, but also introduces the prospect of bringing them in centrally to protect the UK common market, which is in the interests of Welsh business. I have had the privilege of sitting in front of a number of expert panels of industry representatives, and we are acting in the way they are calling for, rather than in the way that some politicians who are more interested in the powers are calling for.

Christina Rees: I thank the Secretary of State for his response, but the UK Government have said that the amendment merely creates a temporary place for the 24 powers to be kept—in a freezer—until new arrangements are discussed. If this is a temporary measure, why permanently alter the Government of Wales Act 2006?

Alun Cairns: Protecting the UK market is absolutely a priority for us. The hon. Lady will have food producers in her constituency who want to sell their products in England according to common practices on food labelling. That is an example of the area of policy on which we are seeking to get agreement. We will continue to work hard with the devolved Administrations to get agreement,

but only the UK Government can act in the interests of the whole UK, not some politicians in other areas who are seeking to represent a regional dimension only.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Last week, the Secretary of State published a list explicitly outlining which powers Westminster intends either to hoard or to dole out, as it sees fit. This week, he published a set of amendments to clause 11 of the withdrawal Bill, without gaining the agreement of either of the devolved nations. Will he explain how that is anything other than a power grab?

Alun Cairns: In the first instance, that list is still subject to discussion, as clearly stated in the headings under the three various sections. I am also pleased to say that the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales recognised that we wanted to publish that list and supported our publication of it, while not necessarily recognising the three elements of it. That demonstrates the positive way in which we seek to work with the devolved Administrations to get agreement. It is only the UK Government who can act in the interests of the whole UK.

Liz Saville Roberts: Today the Welsh EU continuity Bill will be subject to the first stage of the expedited legislative timetable. If it passes, debates over the power grab will be forced out of this Chamber and into the courts. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether he intends to fight us in the courts?

Alun Cairns: As I said in my initial answer, I do not think that the continuity Bill is necessary. The Welsh Government have also said that they would prefer not to pursue it. I genuinely believe that there is enough good will between all Administrations to come to an agreement. After all, if we focus on the needs of businesses and communities, we will achieve a positive outcome. It is when politicians focus on the powers rather than on outcomes that things go wrong.

Rail Electrification: Swansea

3. **Darren Jones** (Bristol North West) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on the effect on the Welsh economy of the decision not to electrify the mainline to Swansea. [904276]

5. **Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on the effect on the Welsh economy of the decision not to electrify the mainline to Swansea. [904278]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (**Stuart Andrew**): The UK Government's record investment in Wales's rail infrastructure is focused on maximising the benefits to passengers while delivering the best value for taxpayers. The £5.7 billion fleet of modern, intercity express programme trains running on the great western main line to Swansea brings significant time savings to and from London and tangible benefits to passengers in terms of speed, comfort and reliability, without the need for a costly, disruptive programme of electrification.

Darren Jones: The failure to fully electrify the line to Swansea means that more people will use their cars. Following the removal of the tolls on the Severn bridge, the Department for Transport said in response to my written parliamentary question:

"No further modelling was undertaken"

on the increase in cars. Has the Minister's Department assessed the potential further gridlock in north Bristol?

Stuart Andrew: I simply do not accept that not electrifying the line to Swansea will not bring benefits—it will. The train journey times to London from those areas will be reduced by 15 minutes. We have to recognise that the costs have gone up significantly. The benefit-to-cost ratio was extremely low and even the Public Accounts Committee recommended looking at the issue again.

Emma Hardy: Does the Secretary of State agree that his Government's broken promises on rail electrification, both in Wales and the wider UK, including Hull, and their unwillingness to provide funding for rail enhancements will damage connectivity and therefore hinder our opportunities for economic growth and development?

Stuart Andrew: I find it very hard to accept a Labour Member talking about rail investment when that party electrified probably only 10 miles of line in 13 years. We are bringing record investment all over the country, particularly in Wales, and we are proud of our achievements.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware of press reports suggesting that the Welsh Labour Government are now cancelling electrification projects in the valleys? Does he agree that if they were serious about improving transport links, they would get on with building the M4 relief road?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is this Government who have been bringing in the investment in our rail infrastructure, and the M4 corridor really does need solving. Many people and businesses across south Wales have been calling for that for a very long time and, frankly, it is time that the Welsh Government got on with it.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): May I urge my hon. Friend to look at the evidence received by the Select Committee on Transport? We heard that the new bi-mode class 800 trains will run to the same timetable, whether they operate on diesel power or on electric, so there will be no loss of service by not having the lines electrified.

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is a great expert in transport matters and he is absolutely right that having those lines above the train will not improve performance. What passengers want is to be able to get to their destination reliably, and that is what we are going to bring back.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Diolch. As we heard from the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), the Labour Government yesterday cancelled the electrification of the line to Ebbw Vale using exactly the same arguments as the Secretary of State for cancelling the electrification of

the main line to Swansea—I do not know whether they swapped press releases or not. Is it not the case that when it comes to the Welsh railways, the Welsh people have been let down by the Governments at both ends of the M4?

Stuart Andrew: I would not accept that. The fact is that we are investing in the railway. Let us not forget that some of the investment in England will benefit passengers in north Wales. For example, the Halton curve helps passengers from north Wales to get to Liverpool and the north-west of England.

Steel Industry

4. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the future role of the Welsh steel industry in the UK steel supply chain. [904277]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): We are working with the sector, the unions and devolved Administrations to support the UK steel industry to develop a long-term viable solution. We are deeply disappointed by the US announcement and are taking all possible action to support the industry.

Tom Pursglove: The steelworks in Corby is part of a comprehensive steel supply chain that involves sites in Wales. Further to the conversations the Secretary of State has been having in Wales, what discussions is he having with UK Government Ministers about how we can best support the UK steel industry as a whole?

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he is doing to support the steel industry. He was at the forefront of the debate two years ago when the steel industry was facing a particular crisis, and it is through his influence, with others, that we have introduced an energy compensation scheme, flexibility over EU emissions targets and 45 trade defence measures to prevent illegal steel dumping in Europe. His influence is pretty strong in this debate.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware that when President Bush introduced steel tariffs in 2002, it led to 200,000 job losses in the US? What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that American politicians, employers and trade unions are pressing President Trump to drop these utterly self-defeating tariffs?

Alun Cairns: We have said that we disagree with the statements the President has made. I was in the US just two weeks ago, and I spoke to our ambassador and the UK's trade commissioner about this issue. I subsequently met the US ambassador here in the UK and I spoke again, just last Friday, to the UK trade commissioner in the US. This is a cross-Government effort. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade is travelling to the US as we speak to pursue and raise these issues. There has been a whole cross-Government approach to this issue and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has raised it directly with the President.

European Union (Withdrawal) Bill

6. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the UK leaving the EU and the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. [904279]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I have regular and constructive discussions with the Welsh Government on EU exit and the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. I look forward to continuing those discussions this afternoon at the meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee in plenary, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Does the Secretary of State agree that agriculture, and hill farming in particular, is vital to the Welsh economy? What is he doing to ensure that the EU money currently going into the rural economy continues to do so after Brexit? What discussions has he had on that with his colleague from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is a great supporter of agriculture across the whole UK and he is right to highlight the importance of the agricultural sector to the Welsh economy. He will also be familiar with our manifesto commitment, as well as statements made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to fund agriculture on a similar scale up to 2022.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The US-UK trade and investment working group was set up in July last year. What representations has the Secretary of State made to that group about the impact President Trump's tariffs would have on the Welsh steel industry?

Alun Cairns: I mentioned to the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) the direct actions I have taken and the whole host of actions being taken by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade. This is such a priority for this Government that there is cross-Government action to support the steel industry. As someone whose father was a welder in the steelworks in Port Talbot, I recognise the importance of this industry to Wales.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, the Welsh Labour Government in Cardiff love nothing more than a long and fuzzy row with Westminster over powers. Does he agree that they would do much better to work constructively and pragmatically with Ministers here to make a success of Brexit, which is, after all, what the people of Wales voted for?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. As my predecessor, he took positive steps to get to a positive relationship with the Welsh Government and laid the foundations of the Wales Bill, which is now the Wales Act 2017. That has clarified the devolution settlement and enabled constructive debate to take place. I am optimistic that on the EU (Withdrawal) Bill we can win if we both focus on the outcomes we need to focus on: the interests of our businesses and communities.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I met representatives of Celsa Steel from my constituency yesterday, who made very clear to me the importance of pan-European safeguards to prevent diversionary dumping as a result of the Trump tariffs. Does the Secretary of State not think it ironic that, at a time when we need to be co-operating more than ever across Europe, we are planning to leave the European Union?

Alun Cairns: I also want to support Celsa Steel, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that Wales voted to leave the European Union, and we have an obligation to act on that instruction. However, he is right about the diversion and the distortion to the market from the risks of the action that is taking place. We are working closely with the European Union to protect the interests of Welsh steelworkers.

Industrial Strategy: Cross-Border Working

8. **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that the growth corridors set out in the industrial strategy facilitate cross-border working. [904281]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): Members across this House recognise that economic activity is not constrained by administrative borders. A perfect demonstration of that is the closeness of the economies of north-east Wales and the north-west of England, supported by the northern powerhouse and the Mersey Dee Alliance. I was delighted to see that growth corridors were formally recognised in the industrial strategy and we will continue to develop these for the benefit of the 50% of the Welsh people who live within 25 miles of the border.

Mr Jayawardena: Wales has great access to my constituency thanks to the M4, but has my hon. Friend considered improving connectivity to the south of England by building the M31, for example, which would link the M3 to the M4, and possibly beyond, with the economic benefits that that would bring for everyone?

Stuart Andrew: I completely agree: we recognise that connectivity—particularly cross-border connectivity—is incredibly important. The Department for Transport is gathering evidence at the moment to inform the second road investment strategy, and I hope that my hon. Friend will put a bid forward.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Bristol has been very successful in attracting financial services to its economy. Now that the tolls on the M4 toll bridge are coming down, what opportunity does Wales have to create a financial services powerhouse from Cardiff and Swansea?

Stuart Andrew: As the hon. Gentleman will know, Cardiff already enjoys a centre of excellence in finance. The fact that the tolls are going on the bridge will make that opportunity even more available, and we will do everything we can to make sure that it benefits in every way it can.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): May I tell my hon. Friend that I had a meeting with commercial property people on Monday? They were telling me that the electrification of the rail line to Swansea is having no effect whatever on investment. What is having an effect is the lowering of tolls on the Severn crossing.

Stuart Andrew: Exactly. We should be talking up the benefits of the investment that is happening in our rail infrastructure to bring about growth for cities such as Swansea. It is disappointing to hear negative comments when we really should be pushing the opportunities that exist for the city.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): There are 7 million residents in north-west England and nearly 700,000 in north Wales. Priming and connecting the two economies makes absolute sense. The issue is funding—money. Welsh Governments have already committed hundreds of millions of pounds to these improvements. What new additional funding have this Government committed to date?

Stuart Andrew: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have given more moneys to the Welsh Assembly under the new settlement, but I completely recognise that the cross-border activity in north Wales and the north-west of England is incredibly important. That is why I was pleased to meet representatives from the all-party group the other day. We are looking at some of the rail investment that is needed, particularly the Halton curve and the Wrexham-Bidston line.

Investment in the Railway Network

9. **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on future investment in the railway network in Wales. [904282]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I hold regular meetings and discussions with the Transport Secretary and his ministerial team to make the case for investment in Wales's railway infrastructure. I am determined to drive forward improvements to Wales's rail connectivity for the benefit of our passengers, commuters and businesses.

Geraint Davies: I am losing my voice, Mr Speaker. HS2 will cost £56 billion and 20,000 Welsh jobs. For £1 billion, we could build two and a half miles of HS2 or halve the time between Cardiff and Swansea and have an electrified Swansea metro. Why is the Welsh Secretary not objecting to the £1 billion cut from Network Rail to our rail infrastructure and investing in Wales instead?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has done very well, considering he has lost his voice.

Alun Cairns: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that HS2 is a UK scheme and provides an opportunity for significant connectivity benefits with north Wales. He refers to the Swansea metro project, which offers interesting opportunities, and I am happy to say that I am meeting Mark Barry, the project's architect, in the coming weeks.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the recently launched West and Wales strategic rail prospectus contains sensible proposals that would, if adopted, significantly improve rail connectivity in north Wales and that they should receive favourable consideration by the Government?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his hard work in this area, because cross-border connectivity is extremely important. It demonstrates how integrated the network is. There are significant investments already taking place across the north Wales network, including improvements to signalling, as well as the Halton curve, which has already been referred to. Any additions to the debate, however, are interesting, and we will look at them in due course.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904359] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 14 March.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that Members across the House will wish to join me in offering our heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of Professor Stephen Hawking, who died earlier today. Professor Hawking's exceptional contributions to science and our knowledge of the universe speak for themselves. As his children have said:

"His courage and persistence with his brilliance and humour inspired people across the world."

Members will also have seen reports of a number of suspicious packages targeted at Muslim Members. I am sure that the whole House will join me in condemning this unacceptable and abhorrent behaviour, which has no place in our society. An investigation is under way and steps are being taken to bring the perpetrators to justice.

I will be making a statement following Prime Minister's questions updating the House on the Salisbury incident.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Vicky Foxcroft: I thank the Prime Minister for agreeing to meet me to discuss the work of the cross-party Youth Violence Commission. Youth violence is complex and needs long-term solutions, but some things can be done right now, such as legislating to ensure that all knives and sharp instruments in shops are locked away or stored behind counters to ensure that no one can steal and use them. Will she do this?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has raised a very important issue. As she says, this is a complex problem, and we need to ensure we have long-term solutions. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will shortly be publishing a new serious violence strategy, which will put an emphasis on early intervention with young people.

It is important that we have tough legislation on knives, but we also need to work in partnership with retailers. We have recently consulted on new measures, including restrictions on knives sold online, and in March 2016, when I was Home Secretary, we reached a voluntary agreement with major retailers about how knives should be displayed and the training given to sales staff to support action to tackle knife crime. She is right, however, to raise this as an area of concern.

Q4. [904362] **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): On the subject of Northern Ireland, does the Prime Minister stand by the commitments made in the joint report of December, and will she confirm that we will accept nothing that will undermine the integrity of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that we stand by all the commitments we made in December. We have been clear that our preferred option is to deliver on them through our new partnership with the EU, with specific solutions to address the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland if needed. The work we are undertaking with the Commission will include that on the final so-called backstop, which will form part of the withdrawal agreement. That cannot be the text that the Commission has proposed, which, as I have said, is unacceptable, but we stand ready to work with the Commission and the Irish Government to ensure that all the commitments on Northern Ireland made in the joint report are included in the withdrawal agreement.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I, along with the Prime Minister, absolutely condemn the vile messages and threatening packages sent to Muslim Members of the House and also the rise in Islamophobia and the abusive messages being sent to Muslim families all over this country. It has to be utterly condemned by all of us, just as we would condemn anybody who attempted to divide our country by racism or extremism of any form. We have to stand united with any community that is under threat at any time.

I am sure the whole House will join me in supporting what the Prime Minister just said about Stephen Hawking, one of the most acclaimed scientists of his generation, who helped us to understand the world and the universe. He was concerned about peace and the survival of the world, but he was also a passionate campaigner for the national health service. He said:

"I have received excellent medical attention in Britain... I believe in universal health care. And I am not afraid to say so."

If we believe in universal healthcare, how can it be possible for someone to live and work in this country and pay their taxes, and then be denied access to the NHS for lifesaving cancer treatment? Can the Prime Minister explain?

The Prime Minister: Let me first join the right hon. Gentleman in saying that there is absolutely no place in our society for hate crime or racism, whatever form it takes. We should stand united against such behaviour and such activities.

I am pleased that we have a good record on cancer provision. More people are surviving cancer in this country than ever before as a result of changes that have

been made and developments in the national health service. Of course we continue to work to ensure that the treatments that we make available are the best that we can provide. I am not aware of the particular case that the right hon. Gentleman has raised with me, but we want to ensure that all who are entitled to treatment through the national health service are able to receive it. There are, of course, questions about particular drugs that are made available to individuals for treatment, which we continue to look at.

Jeremy Corbyn: I will indeed be writing to the Prime Minister about the case about which I am concerned. It relates to a man who has lived in this country for 44 years, has worked and paid his taxes—obviously, he is an older gentleman—and is now being denied cancer treatment. I suspect he is not alone in that, and I urge the Prime Minister to discuss the matter with the Home Office and others.

This week, I received a letter from Hilary, a British pensioner—it is relevant to the point that the Prime Minister just made—who wrote:

“I am now having to pay for my thyroid medication because the CCG needs to save money. I have worked all my life, paid national insurance and... this is not fair”.

Last March, the Health Secretary said that

“it is absolutely essential that we... get back to the 95% target”

for accident and emergency waiting times and that that should happen in

“the course of the next calendar year”.

Well, the calendar year is now up. Can the Prime Minister explain why that is no longer possible?

The Prime Minister: I look forward to receiving the details of the individual case from the right hon. Gentleman, but let me take this opportunity to remind him that I think he raised a case about Georgina with me last October and has not written to me about that. *[Interruption.]* As I have said, I look forward to receiving the details of the case that he has just raised.

What we have done in relation to cancer treatment is ensure that more diagnostic tests are taking place. More people with suspected cancer are being seen by specialists, and more people are starting treatment for cancer. That is why I say that we have seen an improvement in the cancer treatment that is available to people in this country.

I am pleased to say that we have more doctors working in accident and emergency departments. We have put more money in—the Chancellor announced this last year—both to deal with winter pressures and to ensure that those working in accident and emergency departments are able to provide the treatment that is right for the patient before them. Some people do not need to be admitted to hospital; they need to see a GP. We are working with the NHS to ensure that the treatment that patients receive is the treatment that is right for them.

Jeremy Corbyn: My understanding is that Georgina's case was resolved before the Prime Minister was required to do anything about it—following my raising it here. *[Interruption.]* If nothing else, Mr Speaker, that proves the power of Parliament.

Key A&E waiting targets have not been met since 2015, and NHS managers are saying that they will not be met until 2019. February was the worst ever month for A&E performance. NHS Providers director Saffron Cordery said:

“This is the first time we have had to accept that the NHS will not meet its key constitutional standards... If we want to provide quality of care, we need the right long term financial settlement.”

The NHS is clearly in crisis, so why was there not a penny extra for it in the yesterday's statement by the Chancellor?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that we did not wait until yesterday's spring statement to announce more money for the NHS; we announced it in the Budget last autumn. As a result of that, the NHS is getting £2.5 billion more in the forthcoming financial year 2018-19 and more to fund the nurses' pay settlement, when that is resolved.

Jeremy Corbyn: Under Labour, the 18-week target for non-urgent operations was in place. That target has been abandoned by the Prime Minister. When will it be reinstated?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about things that were being delivered under Labour, but perhaps he might look at what Labour is doing in Wales on the delivery of the NHS. The latest annual data on 12-hour waits in A&E show that 3.4% of patients waited more than 12 hours in Wales compared with 1.3% in England. If he wants to talk about meeting targets, he should talk to the Labour Government in Wales.

Jeremy Corbyn: NHS England has abandoned its A&E targets until April 2019, so it is a bit rich for the Prime Minister to be scaremongering about Wales while she is abandoning targets in England—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. There are lots of questions to get through, and they must be heard.

Jeremy Corbyn: A recent National Audit Office report states that NHS funding will fall by 0.3% in 2019. People's lives are at stake. Is the Prime Minister really saying that the A&E doctors are wrong, that the NHS managers are wrong and that the royal colleges and the health unions are wrong, and that it is actually only she who knows best about the NHS?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about scaremongering in Wales, but I was pointing out the facts about what is happening in the NHS in Wales. That is why we often see people in Wales trying to get treatment in England rather than in Wales. We are putting more money into the national health service, but in order to do that, we need to ensure that we have a strong economy to provide the money for the NHS. What do we know about Labour's policies? They would cause a run on the pound, crash our economy and bankrupt Britain, so there would be less money for the NHS.

Jeremy Corbyn: When people are dying because of overcrowding and long waits in our hospitals, the Prime Minister should get a grip on it and ensure that the NHS now has the money that it needs to deal with patient demand. In a recent interview, the Health Secretary said of NHS staff that

“when they signed up to go into medicine, they knew there would be pressurised moments”.

What they also expected was a recognition of that, with an annual pay rise without cuts in their paid leave, and proper funding for the national health service. When there are 100,000 unfilled posts, there are clearly not enough staff around them to share the burden. We started with Professor Stephen Hawking. Just a few months ago, he said:

“There is overwhelming evidence that NHS funding and the number of doctors and nurses are inadequate, and it is getting worse”.

Does the Prime Minister agree with Professor Hawking?

The Prime Minister: Once again, I am very happy to point out some facts to the right hon. Gentleman. We have 14,900 more doctors working in the national health service. We have almost 13,900 more nurses working on our wards. Why did we put an emphasis on nurses working on our wards? It was because of what we saw under the Labour Government in Mid Staffordshire. What we need to do to ensure that we can provide the funding for the NHS—we are providing record levels of funding for the NHS—is to take a balanced approach to our economy. That is an approach that deals with our debts, keeps taxes low on working families and puts more money into our public services, such as hospitals and schools. Labour’s approach would increase the debt, and that would mean less money for our schools and hospitals and higher taxes for ordinary working people, because what we know about the Labour party is that it is always ordinary people who pay the price of Labour.

Q8. [904367] **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): Last week’s launch of a consultation on all aspects of domestic violence will be widely welcomed in Gloucester and across the country. Will the Prime Minister, who has done so much on such issues, confirm today that the Government intend to increase spending, bed provision and, where necessary, the number of women’s refuges, so that those who have survived get the help and safe haven that they deserve?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue. It is one that I have obviously given considerable attention to, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary continues to follow that work. We are entirely committed to developing a sustainable funding model for refuges, and I can guarantee that funding for refuges will continue at the same level as today, because I know how critical the support is to vulnerable people at a time of crisis. We will ring-fence the funding for short-term supported housing overall, including for refuges, for the long term indefinitely. That means that no refuge should worry about closing or have any doubts about our commitment to ensuring that we provide a sustainable funding model for them.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Labour party about hate crime and Islamophobia, and my thoughts are with the family and friends of Dr Stephen Hawking.

For months, the devolved Administrations have been waiting for the UK Government to table amendments to clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. On Monday, the long-awaited amendments were published

but without the agreement of the devolved Governments. Will the Prime Minister tell the House why the amendments have been forced on the devolved Administrations?

The Prime Minister: In one sentence the right hon. Gentleman says that he is waiting for the amendment—the reason why we took time is that we were talking with the Scottish and Welsh Governments—and then when we do publish it he complains that we have published it. He really needs to get his story straight.

Ian Blackford: I encourage the Prime Minister to listen to the question, because it was about agreement. I am afraid that that answer simply was not good enough.

The Prime Minister famously claimed that the UK was made up of “equal partners”. What an irony that is given that she is overseeing the demolition of the devolution settlement. In 1997, the Tories were happy to oppose the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament, and the clothes have not changed. In 2018, they are happy to systematically destroy the settlement that the Parliament thrives on. I call upon the Prime Minister once again: stop this attack on devolution and redouble your efforts in working with the devolved Administrations to find agreement.

The Prime Minister: This Government have actually given more powers to the Scottish Government and will be giving more powers to the Scottish Government. Significant extra powers will be devolved to the Scottish and Welsh Governments as a result of the decisions that we are taking around Brexit. We have given more powers, including the tax-raising powers, but it is just a pity that the Scottish Nationalists have chosen to use those powers to increase taxes on people earning £26,000 or more.

Q9. [904368] **Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): Last week, Horsham held an apprenticeship fair, building on the success that has seen a 70% reduction in youth unemployment since 2010. Nationally, we see increasing exports, increasing productivity and increasing real wages. Will my right hon. Friend again remind the House that it is that sustained economic performance that underpins our investment in our valued public services?

The Prime Minister: I commend Horsham for holding an apprenticeship fair; it is important that we give young people the opportunity of an apprenticeship. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we can fund public services only if we have strength in our economy providing the income for us to do so. In the past few weeks, we have seen that manufacturing output has grown for nine consecutive months for the first time since records began in 1968. We have seen the best two quarters of productivity growth since the financial crisis and the lowest year to-date net borrowing since 2008, and employment is near a record high. The Conservatives are delivering a strong economy, new jobs, healthier finances and an economy that really is fit for the future.

Q2. [904360] **Jack Dromey** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Last week, GKN workers came to Parliament—typically 25 and 30 years’ service, their mums and dads before them working for a British engineering icon that is 259 years old. Sat opposite were the three fabulously

wealthy owners of Melrose, determined to stage a hostile takeover of the company, break it up and sell it off.

I ask the Prime Minister this. She told Parliament that she would act in the national interest; the next 10 days will decide the future. Will she use the powers that she has to intervene and block this hostile takeover in the British national interest?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Business Secretary has been speaking to both companies on an impartial basis. We will always act in the UK's national interest; actually, it is under this Government that we have seen the changes introduced to the takeover code to provide greater transparency and give target firms more time to respond. There is a narrow range of scenarios where Ministers can intervene on mergers on public interest grounds, but we will always ensure that we act in the national interest.

Q10. [904369] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Some 3,157 medical students are going into general practice this year, which is excellent news, but we are still losing too many experienced GPs in their mid-50s due to the tax penalties on their old pension scheme. Would the Government look at a targeted, time-limited exemption on this dedicated group of clinicians, who do so much for the health of us all?

The Prime Minister: That is an important point. As my hon. Friend will know, experienced senior hospital doctors and GPs who become members of the national health service pension scheme benefit from one of the best available defined-benefit occupational pension schemes. We provide generous tax reliefs to allow everyone to build up a pension pot worth just over £1 million tax-free. The issue that my hon. Friend is raising is that although GPs are not penalised if they work after age 55, many may have exhausted the generous allowance for tax relief available by that time. I can say to my hon. Friend that the Chancellor of the Exchequer was, of course, listening to the question that he raised.

Q3. [904361] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): This year, 13 April represents the 99th anniversary of what happened at the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, India, known as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, in which more than 1,000 peaceful protesters were murdered by soldiers under the command of General Dyer. Will the Prime Minister join me in commemorating the massacre and meet me and others who are campaigning for this shameful episode to be remembered across the UK?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very specific issue and a very specific point. I will be happy to look at the question he has raised and respond to him in writing.

Q12. [904371] **Leo Docherty** (Aldershot) (Con): In my constituency, Farnborough, in the borough of Rushmoor, is the birthplace of British aviation and is now home to a thriving range of aviation, aerospace and defence businesses—including Airbus, with its Zephyr. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister join me in extending

our best wishes to the Zephyr team as they look forward to making a world-record-breaking attempt for high altitude unmanned aviation?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in wishing all the very best to the Zephyr team in the attempt that they are making. He is right that his constituency plays a crucial role in the aerospace industry. I am pleased to say that we are continuing to work with that industry through the aerospace growth partnership to ensure that we can further enhance the industry. We wish the Zephyr team well.

Q5. [904363] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): The UK has the lowest growth in the G7. Why is the Government's answer to that to give handouts to some of the wealthiest bankers, to fund an already lavish lifestyle, paid for by taking the crumbs off the table of those on universal credit, whose children depend on free school meals?

The Prime Minister: First, the hon. Gentleman might not have noticed but the wealthiest 1% of people in this country are now paying a bigger share of tax—28%—than they ever did under a Labour Government. If he is referring to the bank levy, may I also say to him that the Conservative party introduced the bank levy, which has raised £15 billion and is predicted to raise a further £11 billion that we can spend on public services. It is the Conservative Government who are changing the way we do it, so that we do it in a better way. We will be raising nearly £19 billion extra from the banks over the next five years—that is £3 billion more from the banks to be spent on public services.

Q14. [904373] **Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Great British food is produced by hard-working farming families in this country. As we produce a new British agricultural policy, does my right hon. Friend agree that supporting food production in this country is a public good?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of food production in this country. I am also happy to commend the work of hard-working farmers up and down the country, and all those who work in our food production industry. As he will know, we now have an historic opportunity as we leave the EU to deliver a farming policy that will work for the whole industry.

Q6. [904365] **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Just minutes ago, Facebook announced that it would be taking down several pages associated with the extremist group Britain First. Does the Prime Minister join me in welcoming that? Does she not also accept that there needs to be a clear role provided by Government to give guidance to social media companies on how they operate in our democracy?

The Prime Minister: I certainly welcome that announcement by Facebook, and I am pleased to say that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has been working with these companies to ensure that they do more and act more clearly in taking down material of an extremist nature. I am very pleased to welcome the announcement that Facebook has made and I hope other companies will follow.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): First, may I congratulate the Prime Minister on her pioneering work in fighting modern-day slavery? However, has she been advised that a central plank of her law enforcement policy is not working, with 65 prosecutions of traffickers abandoned last year because victims feared for their safety and no reparations orders made against convicted traffickers to compensate victims for their ordeals?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. At the meeting of the modern slavery taskforce that I chaired recently—two weeks ago, I think it was—in which I have brought together people not only from across government, but from law enforcement, criminal justice more generally and other areas to look at how we are working on this issue, we were addressing exactly how we can ensure that more prosecutions go ahead in future and perpetrators are brought to justice.

Q11. [904370] **Vernon Coaker** (Gedling) (Lab): Shockingly, in 2017 in this country, 2,120 children were identified as potential victims of child slavery. I know of the Prime Minister's personal commitment to tackling this issue, but surely we ought to have more data. We have no idea how many of those children go missing. We have no idea how many are deported. We have no idea how many are re-trafficked. In 2018, in this country, a modern democracy, that is simply not good enough. Will the Prime Minister tell us what she is going to do about it?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very important issue. It has been a concern for a long time that we sometimes see children who have been identified as the victims of slavery and of human trafficking in a position, sadly, of being taken out by traffickers and resubmitted to the horrible circumstances that that brings to them. On the point he is making about asylum and deportation, we do not return unaccompanied children who do not qualify for asylum or humanitarian protection unless we can confirm that safe and adequate reception programmes and arrangements are in place in their home country. If we cannot confirm such arrangements, we grant temporary leave until the child is 17 and a half. Last October, we confirmed our commitment to rolling out independent child trafficking advocates across the country. This is a system we piloted previously, which will give support to those child victims to ensure that they are given the support they need and that they do not fall back into the hands of traffickers.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Like many towns and cities throughout the country, Telford has experienced some distressing cases of child sexual exploitation. The authorities in Telford have now agreed to conduct an independent inquiry to find out what happened and to give victims answers. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating two brave women—campaigner Holly Archer and *Sunday Mirror* journalist Geraldine McKelvie—on their work in bringing that about? Will she agree to do everything possible to ensure that the inquiry starts without delay and leaves no stone unturned?

The Prime Minister: We have all been shocked by the horrific case in Telford of some of the most vulnerable in our country being preyed upon by ruthless criminals. Of course, it is sadly not the first example that we have

seen in our country. I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Holly and Geraldine on their work. It is not easy, but it is right that they have brought this case to light and that action can be taken. I am pleased that the authorities are now going to conduct an inquiry. As my hon. Friend says, it is important that that inquiry begins its work in order to get to the truth and does so as quickly as possible. I understand that my hon. Friend will meet the Under-Secretary of State for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), to discuss this issue.

Q13. [904372] **Jo Platt** (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Shortly after the Prime Minister took office, she said that she wanted to put the Government on the side of the poorest in society. She even stood in front of a crumbling sign that said that she wanted “a country that works for everyone”. However, a recent Institute for Fiscal Studies report stated that 37% of children are set to live in poverty by 2022, so what went wrong, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: We have seen 200,000 fewer children living in absolute poverty under this Government. We continue to take action to ensure that we are helping families to get a regular income by helping people into work. We are ensuring that the lowest paid in our society get a pay increase through increasing the national living wage and we are helping people with their standard of living by cutting taxes for 31 million people.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the inspirational Music Man Project in Southend, which works with people who have learning difficulties, has now set a world record for tinkling the highest number of triangles ever? Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is yet another reason why Southend should be made a city? Will she and the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), please organise a contest so that Southend-on-Sea can become the first post-Brexit city?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to congratulate the Music Man Project in Southend on that record in tinkling triangles. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office has heard my hon. Friend's bid for Southend to become a city. I must say to him that a number of Members will of course put forward their own towns for that accolade in due course. I knew a city had to have a cathedral; I did not know that it had to have tinkling triangles.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister will be aware that this week the notorious rapist John Worboys was released from high-security prison. One of my constituents, who gave evidence at his trial as a victim, wants to know why Worboys was not tested first in open prison conditions and why the Parole Board is not required to publish the reasoning behind its release decisions, including evidence of contrition.

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, a case is currently before the courts, and I understand that as part of that case the Parole Board will be required to explain the reasons why it took the decision it did. In terms of the overall issue of Parole Board

decisions and their transparency, when this decision became clear, the then Justice Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, called for work to be done to look into the whole question of Parole Board decisions and the transparency around them, and that work is continuing under the current Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am immensely proud to have the world-leading research and teaching hospital of Addenbrooke's in my constituency. Its scale and excellence means that it relies heavily on doctors from overseas, but of late it has struggled to bring some of those doctors in because of restrictions on the tier 2 visa numbers. With applications from the EU also falling, it is becoming a real problem. Can the Prime Minister reassure me and my hospital that she is aware of the challenge and that she has a plan to address it?

The Prime Minister: I am aware of that particular issue. In the longer term, one of the things that we are doing is ensuring that we can train more doctors here in the United Kingdom, but I am aware of the issue that my hon. Friend has raised and I will look into it.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Last year, the Prime Minister acknowledged that our social care system is broken and promised to fix it. Since then, two care providers in Crewe and Nantwich have been placed into special measures and another is worried that it may have to close due to a lack of funding. What does the Prime Minister say to providers who say that the local government settlement does not go far enough and that they cannot afford to wait for the Government's Green Paper?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady will know, I have always said that there were some short-term, medium-term and long-term measures that needed to be taken in relation to pressure on social care. In the short term, we have provided more funding for local authorities—£2 billion extra was announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer—and we are seeing more money going into social care in local authorities. In the medium term, we need to ensure that best practice is spread across the whole country and—she mentioned the Green Paper—we also need to ensure that we can develop a long-term, sustainable funding model for social care. That is what we continue to work on.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is sadly a matter of public record that RBS and HBOS deliberately asset-stripped thousands of potentially viable businesses to benefit their own banks or individual bankers. Evidence before the High Court indicates that Lloyds may also be guilty of the same. Will the Prime Minister consider the calls of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking—endorsed by the chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority, Andrew Bailey—for a full public inquiry into this disgraceful scandal?

The Prime Minister: This issue is of concern to many. Small businesses are the backbone of our economy and we need to ensure that we learn the lessons from what

happened at RBS and HBOS. As my hon. Friend will know, the FCA has reported areas of widespread inappropriate treatment of firms by RBS, which has apologised and set up a scheme for compensation for victims. There is an ongoing investigation being conducted by the FCA into RBS, and it is also undertaking two separate investigations into HBOS. We will continue to work with the independent regulator and the industry to ensure that small and medium-sized businesses get the support they need.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Just since Christmas, there have been five high-profile gun crimes in Haringey, including one last Thursday when a 19-year-old man, Kelvin Udunie, was shot in the head, the marksman being a pillion rider on the back of a moped, at the entrance to a cinema in Wood Green. We know that our streets are plagued by knife crime. The intent to kill with a gun takes the epidemic to a whole new level. This cannot go on and it must stop. Will the Prime Minister please meet me and community leaders to put an end to this epidemic of gun crime?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that the hon. Lady meets the Home Secretary, who will shortly publish a strategy in relation to the issue of serious violence. The use of mopeds for mugging has been known for some time, and my right hon. Friend is already looking at and working on that with the police. I am sure that my right hon. Friend would be happy to meet the hon. Lady on the issue of gun crime.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I agree entirely with the question from the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). The Prime Minister has done more than anyone in the House to end the terrible issue of modern-day slavery, but we have a problem with the treatment of child victims. They are put in the care of local authorities and, as the hon. Gentleman said, they are then re-trafficked. Can we look at having a system, as we do for adults, in which safe homes are provided centrally, not by local government, so re-trafficking cannot occur?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend follows up the question from the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) with an important point about the child victims of trafficking. I will certainly look at this issue. Having independent child advocates, to whom I referred in my response to the hon. Member for Gedling, is one way in which we can give greater support to child victims in order to ensure that they are not lost to the local authorities and re-trafficked. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is a scandal when a victim goes into the care of a local authority, and somebody is then able to come along, remove them from that care and take them back into slavery.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Salisbury Incident

12.39 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the response of the Russian Government to the incident in Salisbury.

First, on behalf of the whole House, let me pay tribute once again to the bravery and professionalism of all the emergency services, doctors, nurses and investigation teams who have led the response to this appalling incident, and also to the fortitude of the people of Salisbury. I reassure them that, as Public Health England has made clear, the ongoing risk to public health is low, and the Government will continue to do everything possible to support this historic city to recover fully.

On Monday, I set out that Mr Skripal and his daughter were poisoned with Novichok—a military-grade nerve agent developed by Russia. Based on this capability, combined with Russia's record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations—including against former intelligence officers whom it regards as legitimate targets—the UK Government concluded it was highly likely that Russia was responsible for this reckless and despicable act. There are only two plausible explanations: either this was a direct act by the Russian state against our country; or, conceivably, the Russian Government could have lost control of a military-grade nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others.

It was right to offer Russia the opportunity to provide an explanation, but its response has demonstrated complete disdain for the gravity of these events. The Russian Government have provided no credible explanation that could suggest that they lost control of their nerve agent, no explanation as to how this agent came to be used in the United Kingdom, and no explanation as to why Russia has an undeclared chemical weapons programme in contravention of international law. Instead it has treated the use of a military-grade nerve agent in Europe with sarcasm, contempt and defiance.

There is no alternative conclusion other than that the Russian state was culpable for the attempted murder of Mr Skripal and his daughter, and for threatening the lives of other British citizens in Salisbury, including Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey. This represents an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom. As I set out on Monday, it has taken place against the backdrop of a well-established pattern of Russian state aggression across Europe and beyond. It must therefore be met with a full and robust response beyond the actions we have already taken since the murder of Mr Litvinenko and to counter this pattern of Russian aggression elsewhere.

As the discussion in this House on Monday made clear, it is essential that we now come together with our allies to defend our security, to stand up for our values and to send a clear message to those who would seek to undermine them. This morning, I chaired a further meeting of the National Security Council, where we agreed immediate actions to dismantle the Russian espionage network in the UK, urgent work to develop new powers to tackle all forms of hostile state activity and to ensure that those seeking to carry out such activity cannot enter the UK, and additional steps to suspend all planned high-level contacts between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation.

Let me start with the immediate actions. The House will recall that, following the murder of Mr Litvinenko, the UK expelled four diplomats. Under the Vienna convention, the United Kingdom will now expel 23 Russian diplomats who have been identified as undeclared intelligence officers. They have just one week to leave. This will be the single biggest expulsion for over 30 years and it reflects the fact that this is not the first time that the Russian state has acted against our country. Through these expulsions, we will fundamentally degrade Russian intelligence capability in the UK for years to come, and if Russia seeks to rebuild it, we will prevent it from doing so.

We will also urgently develop proposals for new legislative powers to harden our defences against all forms of hostile state activity. This will include the addition of a targeted power to detain those suspected of hostile state activity at the UK border. This power is currently only permitted in relation to those suspected of terrorism. And I have asked the Home Secretary to consider whether there is a need for new counter-espionage powers to clamp down on the full spectrum of hostile activities of foreign agents in our country.

As I set out on Monday, we will also table a Government amendment to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill to strengthen our powers to impose sanctions in response to the violation of human rights. In doing so, we will play our part in an international effort to punish those responsible for the sorts of abuses suffered by Sergei Magnitsky. I hope, as with all the measures I am setting out today, that this will command cross-party support.

We will also make full use of existing powers to enhance our efforts to monitor and track the intentions of those travelling to the UK who could be engaged in activity that threatens the security of the UK and of our allies. So we will increase checks on private flights, customs and freight. We will freeze Russian state assets wherever we have the evidence that they may be used to threaten the life or property of UK nationals or residents. Led by the National Crime Agency, we will continue to bring all the capabilities of UK law enforcement to bear against serious criminals and corrupt elites. There is no place for these people, or their money, in our country.

Let me be clear. While our response must be robust, it must also remain true to our values as a liberal democracy that believes in the rule of law. Many Russians have made this country their home, abide by our laws and make an important contribution to our country which we must continue to welcome. But to those who seek to do us harm, my message is simple: you are not welcome here.

Let me turn to our bilateral relationship. As I said on Monday, we have had a very simple approach to Russia: engage but beware. I continue to believe that it is not in our national interest to break off all dialogue between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation. But in the aftermath of this appalling act against our country, this relationship cannot be the same. So we will suspend all planned high-level bilateral contacts between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation. This includes revoking the invitation to Foreign Minister Lavrov to pay a reciprocal visit to the UK and confirming that there will be no attendance by Ministers, or indeed members of the royal family, at this summer's World cup in Russia.

Finally, we will deploy a range of tools from across the full breadth of our national security apparatus in order to counter the threats of hostile state activity. While I have set out some of these measures today, Members on all sides will understand that there are some that cannot be shared publicly for reasons of national security. And of course there are other measures we stand ready to deploy at any time should we face further Russian provocation.

None of the actions we take is intended to damage legitimate activity or prevent contacts between our populations. We have no disagreement with the people of Russia, who have been responsible for so many great achievements throughout their history. Many of us looked at a post-Soviet Russia with hope. We wanted a better relationship, and it is tragic that President Putin has chosen to act in this way. But we will not tolerate the threat to the life of British people and others on British soil from the Russian Government. Nor will we tolerate such a flagrant breach of Russia's international obligations.

As I set out on Monday, the United Kingdom does not stand alone in confronting Russian aggression. In the last 24 hours, I have spoken to President Trump, Chancellor Merkel and President Macron. We have agreed to co-operate closely in responding to this barbaric act and to co-ordinate our efforts to stand up for the rules-based international order, which Russia seeks to undermine. I will also speak to other allies and partners in the coming days. I welcome the strong expressions of support from NATO and from partners across the European Union and beyond. Later today in New York, the UN Security Council will hold open consultations where we will be pushing for a robust international response. We have also notified the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons about Russia's use of this nerve agent, and we are working with the police to enable the OPCW to independently verify our analysis.

This was not just an act of attempted murder in Salisbury, nor just an act against the UK. It is an affront to the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons, and it is an affront to the rules-based system on which we and our international partners depend. We will work with our allies and partners to confront such actions wherever they threaten our security, at home and abroad. I commend this statement to the House.

12.49 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement and echo her words about the service of our emergency and public services.

The attack in Salisbury was an appalling act of violence. Nerve agents are abominable if used in any war. It is utterly reckless to use them in a civilian environment. This attack in Britain has concerned our allies in the European Union, NATO and the UN, and their words of solidarity have strengthened our position diplomatically. Our response as a country must be guided by the rule of law, support for international agreements and respect for human rights. When it comes to the use of chemical weapons on British soil, it is essential that the Government work with the United Nations to strengthen its chemical weapons monitoring system and involve the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

The Prime Minister said on Monday:

"either this was a direct act by the Russian state...or the Russian Government lost control of their potentially catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others."—[*Official Report*, 12 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 620-21.]

Our response must be decisive, proportionate and based on clear evidence. If the Government believe that it is still a possibility that Russia negligently lost control of a military-grade nerve agent, what action is being taken through the OPCW with our allies? I welcome the fact that the police are working with the OPCW.

Has the Prime Minister taken the necessary steps under the chemical weapons convention to make a formal request for evidence from the Russian Government under article IX(2)? How has she responded to the Russian Government's request for a sample of the agent used in the Salisbury attack to run their own tests? Has high-resolution trace analysis been run on a sample of the nerve agent, and has that revealed any evidence as to the location of its production or the identity of its perpetrators?

Can the Prime Minister update the House on what conversations, if any, she has had with the Russian Government? While suspending planned high-level contacts, does she agree that is essential to retain a robust dialogue with Russia, in the interests of our own and wider international security?

With many countries speaking out alongside us, the circumstances demand that we build an international consensus to address the use of chemical weapons. We should urge our international allies to join us in calling on Russia to reveal without delay full details of its chemical weapons programme to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. It is, as we on the Labour Benches have expressed before, a matter of huge regret that our country's diplomatic capacity has been stripped back, with cuts of 25% in the last five years. It is—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman must be heard. There will be adequate opportunity for colleagues on both sides of the House to put questions. Members must be heard.

Jeremy Corbyn: I could not understand a word of what the Foreign Secretary just said, but his behaviour demeans his office.

It is in moments such as these that Governments realise how vital strong diplomacy and political pressure are for our security and national interest. The measures we take have to be effective, not just for the long-term security of our citizens but to secure a world free of chemical weapons. Can the Prime Minister outline what discussions she has had with our partners in the European Union, NATO and the UN and what willingness there was to take multilateral action? While the poisonings of Sergei and Yulia Skripal are confronting us today, what efforts are being made by the Government to reassess the death of Mr Skripal's wife, Liudmila, who died in 2012, and the deaths of his elder brother and son in the past two years?

We have a duty to speak out against the abuse of human rights by the Putin Government and their supporters, both at home and abroad, and I join many others in this House in paying tribute to the many campaigners in Russia for human rights, justice and

[Jeremy Corbyn]

democracy in that country. We must do more to address the dangers posed by the state's relationship with unofficial mafia-like groups and corrupt oligarchs. We must also expose the flows of ill-gotten cash between the Russian state and billionaires who become stupendously rich by looting their country and subsequently use London to protect their wealth. We welcome the Prime Minister today clearly committing to support the Magnitsky amendments and implementing them as soon as possible, as Labour has long pushed for.

Yesterday, Nikolai Glushkov, a Russian exile who was close friends with the late oligarch Boris Berezovsky, was found dead in his London home. What reassurances can the Prime Minister give to citizens of Russian origin living in Britain that they are safe here?

The events in Salisbury earlier this month are abominable and have been rightly condemned across the House. Britain has to build a consensus with our allies, and we support the Prime Minister in taking multilateral and firm action to ensure that we strengthen the chemical weapons convention and that this dreadful, appalling act, which we totally condemn, never happens again in our country.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raised a number of questions about the nerve agent that had been used. He asked whether we were putting together an international coalition to call on Russia to reveal the details of its chemical weapons programme to the OPCW. That is indeed what we did. We gave the Russian Government the opportunity, through the *démarche* that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary delivered to the Russian ambassador in London earlier this week, to do just that. They have not done so.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the corrupt elites and money going through London. As I said in my statement, led by the National Crime Agency, we will continue to bring all the capabilities of UK law enforcement to bear against serious criminals and corrupt elites. There is no place for these people or their money in our country, and that work is ongoing.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about getting an international consensus together. As I said, I have spoken to Chancellor Merkel, President Trump and President Macron. Others have also expressed their support. Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO Secretary-General, said:

"We stand in solidarity with our Allies in the United Kingdom" and

"Those responsible—both those who committed the crime and those who ordered it—must face appropriately serious consequences."

The NATO Council has expressed deep concern at the first offensive use of a nerve agent on alliance territory since NATO's foundation, and allies agreed the attack was a clear breach of international norms and agreements. Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, said:

"I express my full solidarity with PM @theresa_may in the face of the brutal attack inspired, most likely, by Moscow. I'm ready to put the issue on next week's #EUCO agenda."

We will be doing that.

I say to the right hon. Gentleman that this is not a question of our diplomacy or of what diplomatic support we have around the world. This is a question of the

culpability of the Russian state for an act on our soil. He said that we should be trying to build a consensus. It is clear from the conversations that I have had with allies that we have a consensus with our allies. It was clear from the remarks made by Back Benchers across the whole House on Monday that there is a consensus across the Back Benches of this House. I am only sorry that the consensus does not go as far as the right hon. Gentleman, who could have taken the opportunity, as the UK Government have done, to condemn the culpability of the Russian state.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): It seems to me, without any access to closed information, that the use of this particularly bizarre and dreadful way of killing an individual is a deliberate choice by the Russian Government to put their signature on a particular killing so that other defectors are left in no doubt that it is the Russian Government who will act if they are disappointed in any way by those people's actions. In the light of that, the only sensible question the Leader of the Opposition asked was what consultation we propose to have with NATO, other European countries and the American Government about positive action that could be taken to prevent this continuing defiance of international law and the defiance of all rules on the testing and possession of chemical weapons. This is not just a question of expressing our anger about Salisbury. This is actually a serious threat to the safety of the western world unless and until we all do something together to get the Russians to do something, as opposed to simply ignoring us.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. That is why not only are we talking to allies bilaterally, but there will, as I understand it, be a meeting of the NATO Council tomorrow at which this issue will be considered. The President of the EU Council has said that he will be putting this on the agenda of the European Union Council meeting at the end of next week.

My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right: while we rightly focus initially on the use of this nerve agent here in the UK and its impact on us here in the UK, this is about the illegal use of chemical weapons by the Russian state and an illegal programme of developing those chemical weapons by the Russian state. We will leave no stone unturned in working with our allies to ensure that we respond appropriately to that.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Let me thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement.

As the Prime Minister has said, the attack on Mr Skripal and his daughter was an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom. There has to be a robust response to the use of terror on our streets. We must act in a measured way to show that we will simply not tolerate this behaviour. In that regard, I welcome, and associate those of us on the Scottish National party Benches with, the measures contained in the statement. On this matter, I commit my party to working constructively with the Government.

I am sure that the House will join me in extending thanks to the members of the police and security services who are working around the clock on the recent case in Salisbury. It has been warming to see our closest friends

and allies across Europe expressing solidarity and support. Our friends globally must join with us by standing up to this abuse of state power by Russia. I look forward to the discussions in the United Nations, which must speak with a clear and unambiguous voice.

The fact that we are expelling the largest number of undeclared intelligence officers in over 30 years is welcome, as is the desire to examine what can be done from a legislative perspective to defend against hostile state activity. As someone who has previously supported so-called Magnitsky measures, I am pleased that the Government are signalling action in this area. Let me commend the actions of Bill Browder—I have had the opportunity to meet him—who has personally been at massive risk, but has stood up to the effects of Russian state power.

Financial sanctions are welcome, and we must redouble our efforts against any money laundering by those responsible. It must be made clear to the Russian authorities that we will not tolerate activities that infringe international law. While we support the PM's actions, we will continue to scrutinise them carefully, and we must ensure that any proposed legislation is properly scrutinised.

Our thoughts are with those in Russia who have suffered due to the abuse of state power. There is no doubt that that is what we are seeing. In doing so, we look forward to a time when we can engage positively and to a time of peace and co-operation, but the only response today must be a robust one towards the Kremlin and Russia.

The Prime Minister: May I, once again, thank the right hon. Gentleman not just for the tone of his response, but for the comments that he has made? I reassure him that, of course, any legislative proposals we bring forward will have due scrutiny in this House. May I thank him for his constructive offer to work with the Government on this issue, because it is a matter that should concern us across the whole House? I reassure him that, although I made reference to a number of allies who have spoken in support of the United Kingdom on this, others have done so, too? Canada and Australia, for example, have also been very clear that a robust response is appropriate. Once again, I welcome the comments made by the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for her strong leadership and for rising to this challenge? Some in positions of leadership have also risen to the challenge, and I am only sorry that others in such positions have fallen well short.

In the conversations my right hon. Friend is due to have with her allies, which she is quite right to have, will she raise with the German Government the issue of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline on which they are engaged with the Russians? It will cut revenues for Ukraine and eastern Europe and give Russia an unparalleled ability to bully those countries in the future. If Russia is, as we now believe, a rogue state, will she try to persuade our allies in Europe and elsewhere not to treat with it or help to make it better off?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend. One of the things we will be discussing with our allies is how we ensure that the robust message about the act that has taken place on UK soil is consistently given,

and continues to be given, by all our allies. Nord Stream 2 is regularly discussed at the European Union Council, as my right hon. Friend would, I suspect, imagine.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. Her conclusion about the culpability of the Russian state is immensely serious. In addition to its breaches of international law, its use of chemical weapons and its continued disregard for the rule of law and human rights, that must be met with unequivocal condemnation. May I welcome the measures she has taken to downgrade the intelligence capability of the Russian state, and particularly the work that I understand has started with the United Nations? Within the United Nations, it is important to expose what the Russians are doing and to build the broadest possible support against them. Will she say a bit more about what she is doing on that front?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady for the strength of the statement she has just made, which I know is representative of the views of many of her right hon. and hon. Friends on the Labour Back Benches. We are taking this matter to the United Nations. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has already spoken to the UN Secretary-General about this issue. The open discussion that is taking place tomorrow is the start of the process of looking at this issue. As I said in response to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), this is not just about the incident that has taken place here in the United Kingdom; it is about the use of chemical weapons—this illegal use of chemical weapons—that has taken place and about the role of the Russian state in the development of chemical weapons, contrary to international law.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): No reasonable person can possibly doubt that the Russian Government have behaved with arrogance, inhumanity and contempt, not least in failing to respond to the Prime Minister's deadline, which they surely would have done if they had known that they were innocent of this charge. In welcoming the Prime Minister's expulsion of 23 diplomats who are really intelligence agents, may I ask her to make it clear that any retaliation in kind by the Russian Government will be met by further expulsions, perhaps including even of the ambassador, who spends so much time coming to talk to us in this place, bemoaning the poor state of Anglo-Russian relations? Does she accept that Russia traditionally respects strength and despises weakness and that the time has come to recognise that 2% of GDP is not enough to spend on defence when we are reverting to the sort of adversarial relationship that we had when we spent a much higher proportion of GDP on ensuring that this country was well defended?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his remarks. In response to his first point, as I said in my statement, there are other measures that we stand ready to deploy at any time, should we face further Russian provocation. On his other point, as we review our national security capability and our modernising defence programme, we are ensuring that we have the resources and capabilities available to deal with the variety and diversity of threats that this country faces. However, as those threats diversify, not all of them will be responded to by what is conventionally considered to be defence.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I and my party fully support the Prime Minister's statement and position. What is her response to the brave leader of the opposition in Russia, Alexei Navalny, who is not allowed to stand in the presidential election and has said that the most effective action the British Government can take is to use their legal powers, such as unexplained wealth orders, against named individuals who are critical to the Putin operation? He names in particular Mr Alisher Usmanov, who has substantial property and sporting interests, and the First Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Igor Shuvalov, who owns, among other things, a £14 million flat overlooking the Ministry of Defence. Will the Prime Minister act?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support for the Government's actions. As I said in my statement, we do, of course, look at issues regarding corrupt elites and criminal finances and at using the tools and capabilities at our disposal. The National Crime Agency is continuing that work.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her impressive leadership. I associate myself—unusually—with the leader of the Liberal Democrats in calling for greater use of unexplained wealth orders. Will the Prime Minister also use the tools at her disposal to expose the wealth of the Putin family, given that \$300 billion or more has been stolen from the Russian people by that man? We should expose him for what he is, and not be a useful idiot hiding behind the legalism of his crimes.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his suggestion. Unexplained wealth orders are, of course, tools that we use, but we have to use them properly, in accordance with the rule of law, following due process.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, agree with her analysis and fully support the Government's actions. I understand that the Foreign Office has called for an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council. What does the Prime Minister think will be the likely result, given that one permanent member is engaging in unlawful attacks on another? Does she share my concern that Russia's actions in this country, in Ukraine and in backing Assad's murderous regime in Syria mean that the current Security Council mechanism is broken?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. As I said earlier, the Foreign Secretary spoke to the UN Secretary-General yesterday. Later today in New York, the UN Security Council will hold initial consultations. Obviously, Russia is a member of that Security Council, but it is important that we continue to use the international organisations that are available to us. The United Nations is a protector of the international rules-based order. That is what it should be, and we will continue to press for a robust international response.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is clear that there is almost unanimous support in the House for my right hon. Friend's proportionate and right response to this crisis. In particular, she is absolutely right to use the mechanisms of the United Nations to make it clear to everyone what has happened in this

case. Will she also bear in mind that Russia has, either indirectly or directly, authorised and used chemical weapons in Syria? I thank her for what she has said about the Magnitsky amendment, which many of us across the House have been working on for some time. I hope that she will consider implementing it in full, as has happened in America and in Canada.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend picks up on a point made in the previous question: this is not simply one act by Russia, but part of a pattern of various actions, including those in Syria, the illegal annexation of Crimea and its activities in the Donbass. They also include the Russian state's use of propaganda and its attempts to interfere in elections across the continent of Europe. In response to my right hon. Friend's second point, we will bring forward a Government amendment to reflect the Magnitsky considerations to ensure that we have the strongest possible means to deal with the issues.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): We welcome the decisive action taken by the Prime Minister today, which sits in contrast to the policy of appeasement that we have heard from the Labour party Front Bench. I am sure that the people of the United Kingdom are pleased that it is the Prime Minister who is standing behind the Dispatch Box, defending the rule of law and the citizens of this country. She says that she has spoken to our allies over the past couple of days. Apart from words of support, what are the actions to which they have committed to ensure that a message is sent out about this and future actions?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks and for the Democratic Unionist party's support for the Government's action. On actions to be taken by international allies, they were, of course, waiting for us to announce the various actions that we will take following the decision taken by the National Security Council this morning. We will hold further discussions with our allies about how they can support what we are doing through taking actions themselves.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I entirely agree with the approach adopted by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in her response to this outrageous attack. Does she agree that the difficulty we face lies not so much in getting the concurrence of our allies in agreeing the nature of the outrage, but in how we craft a sustained strategy, so that those of us who believe in the rules-based international system can apply the necessary leverage and persuasion on Russia to conform to it? The very serious risk that we run is that if we do not succeed in doing that, the level of violence that Russia will exercise with impunity against other states and us will simply increase. Our allies in particular must have regard to that if we are to make any progress.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely correct that we need to address this issue in that wider sense, because it is about the way in which the Russian state is acting—it believes, with impunity—in a whole variety of ways, and the way in which it is flouting the international rules-based order. We must come together as allies to ensure that we support that international rules-based order and that we have not

just a collective agreement, but a collective approach that ensures that we can challenge what Russia is doing. He is also right that one of the points we should be making to our allies is that while this may have happened in the United Kingdom, it could be happening in any of those states.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I join others in welcoming the measures that the Prime Minister has announced today. As Russia has chosen to act against us in such an outrageous way, we have to demonstrate our determination to defend ourselves. Given that Russia's usual response is to deny all responsibility for such actions, does she intend, as well as seeking the assistance of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in identifying the sample, to ask for that organisation to carry out an investigation, as any member state is entitled to do, including an inspection of any facilities or locations in Russia, where this nerve agent in all probability was produced?

The Prime Minister: We will be talking to the OPCW about not just the ways in which the sample of the nerve agent used here in the United Kingdom can be independently verified, but other actions the OPCW might be able to take.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I welcome the decision of the Government to refer the patiently and carefully acquired evidence of this grotesque attack to the OPCW. Is it the Prime Minister's intention that its findings should be referred to the Russians, the United Nations and ourselves? Will she consider, in the light of those findings, going further on unexplained wealth orders and other financial sanctions against Russia if necessary?

The Prime Minister: We are asking the OPCW to independently verify this, so the nature of this nerve agent can be clear to everyone. As I said earlier, we introduced, operate and use unexplained wealth orders, but we will always ensure that they are done on evidence. We operate according to the rule of law.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's clear statement, her condemnation of the Russians and the action she has taken. In particular, I welcome the fact that the Government are adopting the Magnitsky amendment. Too much money laundered out of Russia is finding its way into the British system. There are two things she could do pretty quickly which would help to tackle that. First, she could bring forward the public register of ownership of properties, which was promised by her predecessor in 2015 and has been delayed by this Government. Secondly, she could increase transparency in our corporate structures, so that we know who forms companies here and where the money comes from and deal with it if it is illicit money brought in by unsavoury people.

The Prime Minister: On transparency in relation to property ownership, I have discussed that with the Business Secretary. We have not been delaying. We need to ensure that we get it right when we introduce it—we have been discussing the timing for introducing it—because

we want to ensure we have all the tools in our locker that we can use and that can help us in the endeavour we are engaged in.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I absolutely 100% support the Prime Minister's statement and the actions she is taking. Following on from the previous question, I want to pick up on the Prime Minister's statement that there is no place for serious criminals and corrupt elites, or their money, in our country. There are amendments, which I am sure Parliament will support, but will the Prime Minister also bear it in mind that the Select Committees could have a real role in teasing out information about what is going on to tackle dirty money in this country, whether in the City of London or elsewhere, to bring evidence to the House that could shape amendments and actions the Government could then take?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her suggestion. I recognise the role that Select Committees can play. I suspect that my right hon. Friend has just set up a stream of work for her own Treasury Committee to undertake.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I assure the Prime Minister that most of us on the Labour Benches fully support the measures she has announced today. Indeed, some of us think they could have come a bit sooner. On the wider issue of Putin's hybrid warfare against our country, will she task the intelligence and security services to investigate Putin's influencing operations in our universities, our think-tanks, our financial institutions and our political parties?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the propaganda activities being undertaken by the Russian state. I will certainly look at the suggestions he makes.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): We should all be thanking God today that it is my right hon. Friend in her place and not the so-called alternative. I am not expecting my right hon. Friend to comment on the detail, but this morning residents in Hyde road in Gillingham in my constituency saw the Metropolitan police and the Army in place, the street in lockdown, and vehicles and items linked to the Salisbury incident removed. I do not expect my hon. Friend to give a running commentary on current operations, but can she confirm two things: first, that she, the Government and the security services are doing all they can to keep my constituents safe; and, secondly, that she can arrange for somebody to provide a briefing to me, as the Member of Parliament, as to precisely what is happening?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to do that. As my hon. Friend will be aware, the police investigation continues. We cannot say where that investigation will take the police in terms of their further inquiries, but I will ensure that he is provided with a briefing as the Member of Parliament.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I completely support everything the Prime Minister has said today. The truth is that under Putin the Russian Federation has managed to combine all the worst facets of communism and all

[Chris Bryant]

the worst facets of rampant capitalism, all wrapped up inside a national security state that keeps its people poor and kills his political opponents. May I ask about the Russian ambassador? Since Alexander Yakovenko arrived, he has repeatedly lied to parliamentarians. He has tried to get Mr Speaker to stop debates on Russia happening in this House and he has tried to interfere in the internal elections of this House. Surely to God, it is time we now told him that we will order our affairs in this country, not him, and he can go home?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we will order our affairs in this country and we will not be told what to do by the Russian ambassador. I fully expect the House authorities to ensure that it is not possible for an external party to interfere in elections in this House. I would also say that it is a brave man who tries to tell the Speaker of the House of Commons what to do and to stand anything down.

Mr Speaker: I must say, for the avoidance of doubt, that he got absolutely nowhere with me. The House can be sure about that.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is noticeable that the length and breadth of this place has completely supported not just the wise words and leadership of the Prime Minister but her firm actions, with the notable exception of those on the Opposition Front Bench. That was a shameful moment. Further to the question asked by the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), democracy is a fundamental British value and there are long-held concerns that Russia has been seeking to undermine it and interfere in it. If those concerns now turn to evidence, will she take equally robust action against Russia to ensure that our great British democracy continues to be protected?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give the assurance to my right hon. Friend of the action we take. We recognise that the first duty of the Government is to safeguard the nation. We treat the security and integrity of our democratic processes, as of everything else in this country, very seriously. In terms of disinformation used by the Kremlin, we know that it persistently uses it to destabilise perceived enemies. Managing that is a long-term priority for the UK. We will continue to work not just as the United Kingdom but with our international partners on efforts to counter that.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr. Alongside many colleagues in the House, I speak on behalf of my party in calling for a robust and immediate response. Sources inform us that Russia is the UK's biggest weapons-grade nuclear substances export market, despite several attempts at a moratorium on depleted uranium by the European Parliament and the United Nations. Will the Prime Minister confirm whether the UK is still exporting nuclear substances to Russia? If so, surely this should be among the very first sanctions imposed?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks and for the support that she has given from her party for the actions that the Government are taking. What we have been talking about today is the use of a nerve agent—of a chemical weapon—on UK soil and

the blatant flouting of the international rules-based order and legal structure around that use of chemical weapons by the Russian state.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): When I served as Security Minister and my right hon. Friend was Home Secretary, I became aware both of her outstanding determination and dedication and of the commitment and expertise of our security services and the police who deal with counter-terrorism. She knows, as the House knows, that that is led by the Metropolitan police, but this event happened in Salisbury and could have happened in Berkshire or Lincolnshire. Will she ask the Home Secretary to look at whether our local police forces, given the dynamic nature of these threats, are equipped and informed adequately to deal with them in the first instance?

The Prime Minister: As a former Security Minister, my right hon. Friend has a particular understanding of these issues. The ability to bring in the capabilities of the counter-terrorism police, who do not just operate in the Metropolitan police, as he knows, but have regional bases around the country, is part of the layered structure that we have in relation to police forces. I am sure that he will be making sure that the police look at the immediate response that they had to this incident. We certainly do not want to see an incident of this type happening again on United Kingdom soil and that is why we are giving a very clear message to the Russian state, but we do want to ensure that all our police forces are aware of the threats that they may face.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister's words were appropriate, measured and correct, and she has my full support. She mentioned dirty money from Russia. Can she look again at the role of tax havens internationally, including those in British overseas territories and Crown dependencies?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. As he knows, we have been taking a number of measures in relation to financial activities in the British overseas territories and dependencies, and we continue to press on those. Of course, we have enhanced our ability to deal with these issues here in relation to economic crime through the formation of the national economic crime centre. I am pleased to say, having formed the National Crime Agency, that we have now set up that national economic crime centre as part of the NCA, which brings a number of capabilities together to deal with these issues.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): My constituents of Harlow will be strongly reassured by the way in which my right hon. Friend is guarding the nation's security. Can I ask her to condemn the remarks of President Putin, who attacked Jews and other nations for meddling in the United States elections? Given that she has also talked about the possible rogue use of these chemical weapons, can I ask her what the prospect is of such chemical weapons ending up in the hands of extreme Islamists?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I also condemn the remarks that my right hon. Friend referred to that were made in relation to certain communities in the United

States. In relation to the second part of his question, what we are talking about here is a nerve agent that was developed as part of a chemical weapons programme by the Russian state, and I think that will give him a clear message in relation to this.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I fully support what the Prime Minister said in her statement and the actions that she outlined today. I have some concerns about whether we have a proper strategy in place to combat chemical weapons attacks against this country and in particular, these small-scale attacks—it is joined up with the security services, the Government and the armed forces. Will she give me some reassurance or tell me whether work is continuing to improve that?

The Prime Minister: Yes. Obviously, this is an issue that we do look at and we have a strategy in place, but we will ensure, given what has happened, that we review that. We will look again to make sure that we have the best possible opportunity to ensure that this cannot happen again.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): While welcoming the Prime Minister's statement, as almost everyone else has, I join my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) in mentioning the importance of the international rule of law and say that this is a very important moment of decision for China—to decide which side she is going to sit on in this arrangement. I urge my right hon. Friend to make sure that we take the most energetic steps to ensure that China stands with the rest of the civilised world on the side of law and responsibility.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue in this way. We want to see the maximum possible adherence to the international rules-based order across the whole world. In different contexts, this is a matter that I raised when I was in China recently.

Mr Speaker: Order. This is an extremely important parliamentary occasion and it is understandable that very large numbers of Members should want to question the Prime Minister. Can I politely suggest that colleagues should seek to ensure that their questions are as succinct as the Prime Minister's replies have been? That way, we might get through a very great many more quickly than we otherwise would.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I add my support to the measures that the Prime Minister has announced and the condemnation of what is increasingly looking like a rogue state. On the question of the integrity of the United Nations Security Council, we must now begin to talk about reform. Russia cannot be allowed to simply sit pretty, thumbing its nose at the rest of the world community and feeling that it is immune from the rule of law internationally. Will she initiate that sort of reform discussion with the Secretary-General?

The Prime Minister: Once again, I thank the hon. Gentleman for the remarks he has made today and the support that he has given to the Government, as he did on Monday. We talk to the United Nations about reform of the United Nations in a whole variety of ways. The Catch-22 is that any decision that might be taken in the Security Council to reform it could be

subject to a veto by Russia, which is sitting there, but the point has been raised not just by the hon. Gentleman but by others, and this is something that we will look at.

James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): The Prime Minister has underlined to the House that the Russian state has either been utterly reckless at best, or at worst, directly complicit in the deployment of a harmful substance on our soil. She said in the statement that she would be taking new measures to harden our defences against hostile state activity. With that in mind, will she ensure that the appropriate balance is provided between counter-terrorism and counter-espionage to ensure that our excellent security and intelligence agencies are appropriately focused to combat and directly disrupt those who would cause harm in our country?

The Prime Minister: I say to my right hon. Friend, who also, as a former Security Minister, has a particular knowledge and understanding of these issues, that I entirely take the point that he has made. We constantly ensure that the balance is right between counter-terrorism and counter-espionage, and we will of course continue to ensure that that balance is maintained properly.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Responding with strength and resolve when your country is under threat is an essential component of political leadership. There is a Labour tradition that understands that, and it has been understood by Prime Ministers of all parties who have stood at that Dispatch Box. That means when chemical weapons are used, we need more than words, but deeds. May I ask the Prime Minister what more she can do to enhance our solidarity with our allies, particularly at a time when nationalist forces are trying to drive wedges between democratic countries, with some of those forces backed and supported by the Russians themselves?

The Prime Minister: First of all, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: there is a strong tradition in the Labour party of recognising the importance of acting in the national interest and acting when our national security is under threat. We have seen that from Governments of all complexions over the years. In relation to the point about international activity and the deeds that we need to take, it is right—we will be continuing to talk. We have been speaking to our allies, even before this event took place, about the ways in which we could deal with and address some of the activities and actions that Russia is taking across the continent of Europe and elsewhere, but we will of course redouble those efforts now.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of our best assets against Russian disinformation and propaganda is the BBC World Service, and will she consider ways of extending its reach, perhaps by incorporating world television? Does she also agree that we need to be very careful not to give any pretext, however unjustified, for the Russians to take action against the BBC and other free media outlets?

The Prime Minister: I would hope that the Russian state would be prepared to accept the importance of the free media, but sadly, from one or two things we heard last night, it seems that that might not be the case. My

[The Prime Minister]

right hon. Friend is right, however, that the broadcasting of the BBC World Service is an important element of the UK's reach and an important outlet for those who believe in democracy, the rule of law and free speech and expression.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I was glad to hear the Prime Minister mention the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, and I welcome the commitment to the Magnitsky amendment, but she will understand that many opaque Scottish limited partnerships and limited liability partnerships are engaged in money laundering from Russia, via Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine, through this country. Will she speak to Cabinet colleagues and consider introducing amendments to the Bill to tackle these corrupt elites, as she put it—because money laundering is happening via Companies House at the moment?

The Prime Minister: We take money laundering very seriously and have been working for some time with law enforcement and the financial sector on ways to improve the action we take against it. This is one of the things I expect the national economic crime centre to be looking at very closely.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I strongly welcome the action that my right hon. Friend has announced today. One way Russia seeks to extend its influence in Europe is by building relationships of energy dependence. Is she aware that Britain has recently started to receive shipments of liquefied natural gas, and does she agree that Britain should not provide a market for Russian gas? If we need to bring in extra LNG imports, we have allies such as Qatar, Malaysia and Australia who are more than willing to sell it to us.

The Prime Minister: I can reassure my right hon. Friend that in looking at our gas supplies we are indeed looking to other countries.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): As a strong advocate for the defence and security of our country, I am another one who supports the Prime Minister's statement today. I would like to draw her attention to something she said in her statement that I would not want to get lost, which is that although our response must be robust, it must also remain true to our values. As such, will she say, as I think she has already, not that we will ban Russia Today, which is a strong point to make, but that this country believes in a free media, that we are not frightened of it, even though we hear opinions that are against us, and that we also believe in the rule of law and democracy?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right. We do believe in the rule of law and democracy and in a free media, although of course the question of the status of Russia Today in broadcasting in the UK is not a matter for the Government but for Ofcom, which is independent, to consider.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Prime Minister is absolutely right to say that our argument is not with the Russian people but with the Russian state, which

has sponsored murder on our streets. Today we have heard absolute solidarity from across the western world and most political parties, but what statement of support has she received from the one political party that gives unequivocal, 100% backing to the Leader of the Opposition, the Communist party of Great Britain?

The Prime Minister: I do not believe I have received any such statement from the Communist party of Great Britain, although I noticed just one or two weeks ago it said it would not stand candidates against the Labour party and that it now felt more comfortable working with it.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I strongly welcome the Prime Minister's statement but urge her to go further and, as others have said, use energy policy as a new way of tackling this Russian threat. We all acknowledge the significant British energy interests in Russia, but will she confirm that Putin's military and intelligence assets are primarily funded by the sale of Russian fossil fuels, and can I commend to her the EU's energy security strategy, which was largely written in London and is reducing Europe's dependence on Russian fossil fuels?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point—one that others across the House have made—about the extent to which Russia uses its energy and the finance it provides to influence and have an impact on countries in receipt of it. I assure him that we will continue to discuss with the EU not just our energy security but the wider energy security issue.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Many Members of this House and the other House are members of multilateral parliamentary organisations, such as the Council of Europe and the NATO parliamentary assembly. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one way we can get behind her leadership and the Government's position is by getting the message across when we attend events and explaining the Government's policies, what has happened and why our allies should support us?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has raised an extremely valuable point. I welcome his suggestion and would encourage him and other Members who are members of those multilateral organisations to do just that.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister will know that I do not shy away from criticising the Government's international policies when they get it wrong, but she should know that she has my full and unequivocal support for the measures she has set out today. Particularly in the light of the revelations coming out of the Mueller inquiry and some of the other questions today, will she assure us that she will leave no stone unturned when examining the Russian state's attempts to subvert our parliamentary democracy, whether with human assets or financial, cyber, propaganda or other means, however uncomfortable some of those findings might be for us?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to give that commitment to the hon. Gentleman, and I thank him for his comments. He is not backwards in coming forwards when he wishes

to criticise the Government, but he has given support to the Government—not just today but on Monday—and I welcome that and thank him.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I, too, welcome my right hon. Friend's clear and decisive actions. Can she reassure British citizens looking to travel to Russia over the coming weeks and months that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will provide regular updates and that their safety will be paramount?

The Prime Minister: I can give that assurance to my hon. Friend. I suggest to those who wish to travel to Russia that they check the Foreign Office advice. My understanding is that the travel advice has not changed, but of course people should check that before they leave.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): This is a day for the House to speak as one for the nation. The Prime Minister will be reassured to hear that a clear majority of Labour MPs, alongside the leaders of every other party, support her firm stance. Does she realise that this situation will probably get more difficult before it gets better, and is she prepared to stay the course and face down this international bully and wrecker of liberty and the rule of law across the world?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks—he made a strong statement on Monday in the House as well—and assure him that I and the Government will stay the course. As I said in my statement, we recognise that there might be further Russian provocation. If there is, we have further measures we can deploy, but it is important—and we will encourage our international allies to do this too—that we recognise that this is an important moment to stand up and say to Russia, “No, you cannot do this!”

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Russian economy is a fraction but its expenditure on offensive capability a multiple of ours. Is there a lesson there?

The Prime Minister: Of course we constantly look at the resources we put in to ensure our national security, which is assured across a number of Departments, and we continue to do so.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Prime Minister's robust response today. Further to the confirmation that no Minister or member of the royal family will attend the world cup this summer, does she believe that this should also extend to senior FA officials, and will she ask our NATO and EU allies to join us in this endeavour?

The Prime Minister: The question of attendance at sporting events is a matter for the sporting authorities. They will be aware of my statement today and that we are saying no Ministers or members of the royal family will attend the world cup, and I am sure they will want to consider their position.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): As chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, last year I led a delegation to St Petersburg and was met with great warmth and

hospitality by many Russian people. Will the Prime Minister stress that our opposition is not to them but to their appalling leadership? The Russian ambassador has made it clear that we can now expect retaliation. Will she send a clear signal to him and Moscow that the UK will not be threatened?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks. I think that last night I saw the Russian ambassador quoted as saying that Russia was not a country that accepted ultimatums. Well, I can say to my hon. Friend and others that the United Kingdom is not a country that accepts threats, and we will stand up against them.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I welcome the Prime Minister's reminder that we have no argument whatsoever with the people of the Russian Federation, who, after all, are living under Putin's dictatorship all the time. Inevitably, the action that must be taken against Putin will make it more difficult for organisations that seek to maintain good relations with the ordinary people of the Russian Federation. Is there anything more that the Government can do to help those organisations to continue their good work, even while we are invoking more strict and robust sanctions against their dictator leader?

The Prime Minister: As I said in my statement, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) said in his question, we are very clear about the fact that we have no argument with the Russian people. It is with the Russian state—with the Russian Government and their actions—that we are concerned. I think that in the response that we make, it is important for us to make that clear not just in our words but in our actions. What I have talked about today is a response that affects the Russian state and the Russian Government, but not the Russian people.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): When it comes to the longer term, given the actions of the Russian state under President Putin, has the time not come for a fundamental reassessment of our defence spending—preferably in collaboration with our allies, but alone if that is not possible?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend will know, we are one of the limited number of countries in NATO that maintain the commitment to spending 2% of GDP on defence. As I am sure he also knows, the modernising defence programme is currently being undertaken alongside the national security capability review. It is important for us to be able to deal with the variety of threats that we face. However, I must say to my hon. Friend, as I have said to other Members, that as we look at how we deal with those threats, not all of them will be dealt with in a way that would conventionally be considered a matter for the Ministry of Defence.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The Prime Minister has rightly said that the attacks in Britain have been part of an ongoing contempt for Britain, contempt for the rule of law and contempt for our values. There has also been a contempt for our alliances, both political and military. Will the Prime Minister work with those political and military alliances, so that together we can bring about a root-and-branch removal of Russian

[Mrs Madeleine Moon]

interference in our political, educational and financial institutions? Let this be a marker: no more. Now they will fear what we will do to hit back at the interference that they have shown us.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for the commitment that she has shown, as a parliamentarian, to the alliance that we have through NATO, which is very important to us. It is the bedrock of European defence. I can certainly say that we will continue to work through those alliances to ensure that we are sending a very clear message that this is not acceptable.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for her decisive and vigorous action in response to what was, after all, an attack on the United Kingdom. In some ways it had flashes of the Iron Lady about it. But it was also in stark contrast to the attitude of the Leader of the Opposition, who simply could not bring himself to condemn Russia for this outrageous act.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): That is not true.

Mr Francois: He simply could not do it. Is that not because he remains at heart what he has always been—a CND badge-wearing apologist for the Russian state? [Interruption.]

The Prime Minister: I think that people will draw their own conclusions from what they have heard today, but let me also say to my hon. Friend that I am sure that he, like me, takes great reassurance from the positive messages of support that have come from the Labour Back Benches.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): Our way of life in this country and in the west is based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law—

Emily Thornberry: When you read Hansard you will see. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Strongly held opinions have been expressed, and everyone can consult the record. I understand that there is an intensity of feeling, but the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) must have his question heard, and then the answer will be heard.

Phil Wilson: Our way of life in this country and in the west is based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and should be defended. That is why the Prime Minister is right to impose sanctions against a state that does not believe in those principles. Will the Prime Minister give a commitment to come back to the House if she feels that there is a need for further consideration of sanctions?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important point. I said in my statement that there were further measures that we might wish to deploy if we were subject to further Russian provocation, and if we choose to do so, I will of course come back to the House.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the actions of the Russian Federation are totally incompatible with membership of the Council of Europe, which believes in democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and will she ensure that we can expel Russia from the Council of Europe as a reprisal? Its continuing membership seems to fly in the face of our commitment to those important values.

The Prime Minister: That, too, is an important point. I do not think that it is within the hands only of the United Kingdom to expel Russia from the Council of Europe, but my hon. Friend will have heard our right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) suggest that Members of Parliament who are members of such multilateral groups should be making every effort to make the point about the illegitimate activity that has been undertaken by Russia.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and the measures that she has announced, which will only be strengthened if our allies take similar action. Will she say more about NATO, and tell us whether she will be bringing together NATO Heads of State and Government to discuss a co-ordinated response?

The Prime Minister: As I think I said earlier, I believe that the North Atlantic Council will be meeting tomorrow to discuss this issue, and I shall be talking to a number of allies within NATO about the co-ordination of the response. As I also said earlier, they have been waiting to hear the details of our response, which I brought first to Parliament.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): The Prime Minister is clearly aware that the Kremlin is using a full spectrum of tools in what it considers to be its "new generation" warfare against the west—and assassination is one element of that. Is she also aware of the important work done in the 1970s and 1980s by the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in the United States to methodically expose Kremlin subversion, espionage and disinformation, which in that era were called "active measures"—aktivnoye mirovpiviatnoe? Will she consider the possibility of similar work in this country now? Shining the light of truth on Russian subversion today, whatever one calls it, is a critical part of defending democracy and undermining that Russian subversion.

The Prime Minister: I was not aware of the details of the work of the Senate Committee to which my hon. Friend has referred, but it is the case that this Government are not afraid to call out Russian actions in public when we see them taking place. I take his point about a more detailed and forensic look at the activities of the Russian state, and I will certainly consider it.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I support the Prime Minister's strategy, but may I remind her that during the Putin years he has become emboldened, sometimes because our allies, in Europe and internationally, have not always been prepared to face down aggression of this kind in view of their commercial interests? If we are going to stay the course, will the Prime Minister remind our allies that they are as much under threat as we have been with this act of state terror?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has made a very important point. This may have happened on UK soil today, but it could have happened in any one of a number of countries. Other countries are themselves seeing other actions being taken by Russia, such as attempts to interfere in elections and propaganda and disinformation campaigns. It is important that we work together as far as possible.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I add my support for the cool, calm, collected and correct way in which the Prime Minister has responded to a very serious threat to this country? Would she be pleased to know that the First Ministers of both Wales and Scotland have tweeted their support for her and for the action that she has taken, and will she undertake always to keep the devolved Administrations fully informed of what is happening?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for letting me know about the tweets put out by the First Ministers in Scotland and Wales. I am pleased to say I will be meeting both of them later this afternoon in both the bilaterals and the Joint Ministerial Committee plenary meeting. We have been keeping the devolved Administrations aware of what we have been doing, and I certainly undertake to continue to do that.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Prime Minister has made the right call on the facts before her today, and her judgment in this matter is correct. Will she also look at the transport of materials and assets from other countries, because material will often not go direct from Moscow to London? Will she ensure that our European and NATO partners take the same action if evidence leads to that conclusion?

The Prime Minister: That is an important point and it has been raised. We will be looking at the movement of materials and indeed, as I indicated in my statement, at any further action we can take on the movement not only of materials, but of people. We will of course be discussing that with our allies.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The Prime Minister has such widespread support because she has learned the lesson of history that tyrants must be stood up to. May I encourage her to impose a freeze on assets, so that people do not have the opportunity of taking them out of the country in the short term, and to boost the military resources in Estonia, where we already have 800 troops, to show very tangibly that we will support our friends and allies who might also be at risk from Russia?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks. As I said in my statement, we will freeze Russian state assets wherever we have the evidence that they might be used to threaten the life or property of UK nationals or residents. I was pleased to be able to visit our troops in Estonia last September. We are of course there with other allies, and I was pleased that at the Anglo-French summit in January President Macron committed to a continuing contingent of French troops joining our troops in Estonia. That is an important collective symbol of our determination to protect the west against Russia.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. Given the inevitable focus over recent years on ISIS and the terrorism we have seen at home, is the Prime Minister content that across the Government, the Home Office, the security services and other agencies we have enough specific Russian expertise as well as enough resource, or do we need to increase that expertise given this event and many others which show that the Russian Government are intent on undermining our democracy?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right that in recent years there has been an appropriate and correct focus on counter-terrorism, but that does not mean we have not been looking at hostile state activity and at counter-espionage measures, because we have. We keep these in balance as we go forward and assess the threats we are facing, and we will continue to do so.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Ever since Russian troops first entered Ukraine, friends from many different countries have told me how false news stories emanating from Russian sources have been used aggressively to influence public opinion and undermine legitimate democracies. They use social media platforms and traditional media; hybrid warfare is a key part of this. Will the Prime Minister call for an international strategy to deal with hybrid warfare? Can it be on the EU agenda next week and be discussed at the NATO summit in July?

The Prime Minister: I have already raised at previous meetings of the European Union Council the issue of the Russian use of disinformation and propaganda and would expect to raise it again. We recognise the importance of the disinformation campaign work being done by the Kremlin; managing it is a long-term priority for the UK, but in doing that we will of course work with our international allies.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. If colleagues were willing to imitate the legendary succinctness of the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) in terms of the format of questions, we could probably accommodate everybody, but if there are going to be mini-speeches some might lose out.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I listened very carefully on the subject of travel advice and advice for Football Association officials. The Prime Minister will remember the pitched battles in Paris that English supporters faced; will she reappraise the protection and security afforded to them if they travel?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we will of course look at the security and protection of any UK football fans who are travelling.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I, too, strongly support the Prime Minister's robust position. Does she recall the enormous efforts made during John Major's Government to build good relations with Russia? Indeed, John Major went to see President Yeltsin, and I was lucky enough to go with him. Will the Prime Minister stress that our beef is not with the people of Russia,

[David Tredinnick]

with whom we share cultural links, but just with the leadership, and if we can persuade Russia to return to the rule of law we can rebuild those relations?

The Prime Minister: As I said before, our argument is not with the Russian people and we continue to recognise that this is about the actions of the Russian state and Government. As I said earlier in my statement, many of us looked at a post-Soviet Russia with hope when that was first developed, but, sadly, because of the way in which President Putin has been dealing with these matters, the picture is very different today.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): In welcoming the Prime Minister's actions and statement, may I point out that one notable ally who has not yet spoken out against Russia's actions in Salisbury is President Trump? Will she urge him to condemn vociferously Vladimir Putin and the Russian Government's actions, and to do so without delay?

The Prime Minister: I spoke to President Trump yesterday and he has spoken out against this incident. We will be continuing to speak with the American Administration because they are among the allies we would encourage to work with us in a collective response to this issue.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I also commend my right hon. Friend on the package of measures she has taken today against this outrageous and illegal act on British soil. May I ask that all suspicious deaths be thoroughly investigated by the police, and that if the Russian Government are implicated in any of them, she stands by to take further tough measures against that state?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, and this question has been raised before. Of course the reinvestigation of any deaths is a matter for the police; it is for them to consider what action to take. At present, their focus is clearly on this investigation, but I am sure they will look at that matter in due course.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Council of Europe has already been mentioned as one of the platforms on which we engage with Russia, although Russia has been withholding its payments to it for some time now. There is a motion on Magnitsky before the 46 other countries, and there is also an inquiry into the death of Boris Nemtsov. Would it be helpful if the Minister for Europe and the Americas came to our next session in Strasbourg to help spread the word that we need a Magnitsky law across Europe?

The Prime Minister: I am certainly willing to look at the hon. Lady's proposal.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): We have recently seen a marked increase in Russian activity in the Balkans, very often using the Serbs as a proxy to try to dissuade some of the western Balkan states from joining NATO. Will my right hon. Friend urgently commit to discussing with NATO how to make sure those countries can accede to it as quickly as possible?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. We are happy to look at the accession of certain of those countries to NATO, and I am pleased that we will be hosting a western Balkans summit here in the UK in July.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I endorse the actions that the Prime Minister has taken and the unavoidable conclusion she has come to. Was she as disappointed as I was that shortly after the powerful and excellent statement from Secretary of State Tillerson he lost his job in the Trump Administration? Will she pass on to President Trump the message of how much we supported the words of Tillerson and encourage President Trump to ensure that the person he appoints as his replacement is equally robust about the dangers from Russia?

The Prime Minister: Who forms part of the American Administration is not a matter for me; it is for the President. However, we are leaving our American colleagues in no doubt about the seriousness of this issue. Mr Tillerson did indeed make robust comments after this incident, and I am sure we will be working with his replacement to ensure that America is one of those allies who stand alongside us.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): This attack on our soil is part of a long and aggressive strategy by Russia not just to undermine the west, but to divide and rule. With that in mind, does the Prime Minister agree that we need to do more to call out the Putin regime, including by recognising their occupation of Georgia? That is what it is: an occupation.

The Prime Minister: We of course stand ready to call out the Putin Administration and Russian Government; we do that across a number of fronts and will continue to do so.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement and the concern she expressed to me yesterday regarding the surprise substances some of us received in our parliamentary post this week—not on a Salisbury scale, but frightening none the less. Will she commit to those who operate within and outside feeling the full force of the law, and go a bit faster on the long-promised public registers of property, many of which are Russian-owned? This has been Government policy since David Cameron, and if they were in place by now, we would know where the assets are to freeze.

The Prime Minister: I reiterate the comment that I made at Prime Minister's questions that these were appalling acts against Muslim Members of this House, and of course a full investigation is taking place. I have discussed the public register of ownership with the Business Secretary and it is the Government's intention to bring that forward, so that we can ensure that we shine a light on the issue.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): While we have been sitting here, the political journalist Tom Newton Dunn has tweeted:

"Corbyn's spokesman clarifies he does not believe there is proof yet that Russia is responsible for #Salisbury—and MI5/MI6 may be wrong: 'There is a history between WMDs and intelligence which is problematic, to put it mildly'."

Will my right hon. Friend reiterate the faith that she has in the intelligence services to be absolutely certain about the evidence that she receives? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. This is not so much about the views of a journalist. The hon. Gentleman is in order to ask for the views of the Prime Minister on the intelligence services, and that he has done. That is perfectly orderly.

The Prime Minister: I am surprised and shocked by the statement that has been put out by the spokesman for the Leader of the Opposition. *[Interruption.]* As I was going to say, it is clear from the remarks that have been made by Back Benchers from the Labour party that they will be equally concerned about that remark. They stand four-square behind the Government in the analysis that we have shown and the action that we have taken.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): In 2010, Gareth Williams, a British security employee, was found naked and decomposing in a padlocked holdall. The coroner ruled that it was an unlawful killing and that a professional contortionist would not have been able to get out of the bag. In the light of the events with Russia, will the Prime Minister now reopen that case to find out whether Mr Williams was indeed another victim of Vladimir Putin?

The Prime Minister: I recall the case that the hon. Gentleman has raised. As I said in response to an earlier question, investigations into criminal activity will be a matter for the police, and it is for them to determine whether they reopen the case.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): On behalf of the people of South Leicestershire, may I welcome the Prime Minister's robust but measured statement? On Monday, I met members of the senior management of the BBC World Service at BBC Broadcasting House. The Prime Minister is correct to have told the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) that broadcasting is a matter for Ofcom, but funding is not. I understand that the BBC World Service is in communication with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Will the Prime Minister assure the House today that if the BBC World Service needs additional funding to combat Russia Today, particularly in the Balkans and the Baltic, she will speak to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about that?

The Prime Minister: My understanding is that discussions are indeed taking place on the funding of the World Service and that we expect a resolution in due course.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I should like to add my full support to the Prime Minister's robust response today. As director of the British Council in St Petersburg from 2005 to 2008, I have first-hand experience of the utterly ruthless way in which the Russian state can operate. Does she share my concern that holding the World Cup in Russia this summer could be perceived as a global vindication of Mr Putin's regime? If so, will she be making representations to FIFA to explore the possibility of postponing the World Cup until 2019 and holding it in a more appropriate host country or countries?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support, which is particularly valuable given his experience with the British Council. The holding of sporting events and the choice of venues are matters for the sporting authorities. The sporting authorities here in the United Kingdom will have heard what I have said today about the actions of the Russian state.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): This attack could have been so much worse. What if a group of schoolchildren playing in the park had been the first to approach the victims after they collapsed? Does the Prime Minister share my disgust that the perpetrators of this crime must have known that?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, one other individual, Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, was affected as a first responder, but it could have been so different. It is thanks to the prompt action of the emergency services that this matter has been contained in the way that it has, but those who undertook this brazen and despicable act must have known the potential implications.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Facts are chieftains that winna ding, which is why there can be no feigning of impotence anywhere on these Benches. What is the Prime Minister's assessment of the example advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on Monday regarding asking the Spanish Government to halt the use of their ports for refuelling by the Russian fleet?

The Prime Minister: At least one other member state of the European Union has indeed refused the Russian state the possibility of refuelling its ships. This matter is raised from time to time, and I recognise its significance and the passion with which the hon. Gentleman and his colleague have raised it.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Nobody should be surprised that Russia has denied responsibility for the attacks in Salisbury. It is a country that has denied taking part in the Olympics doping scandal and in the rigging of elections. Worst of all, it has denied any involvement in the killing of Alexander Litvinenko. Given that, will the Prime Minister please assure the House that Russia will be treated according to its actions and not its words?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We should all be clear that the attitude of the Russian state is shown by what it does, not by what it says.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and the actions that she has outlined. She said that there was a need for a new targeted power to detain at the UK border those suspected of hostile state action. Many of us will be surprised that we do not already have that power. Is there a plan to bring forward emergency legislation, so that such a power could be put in place quickly?

The Prime Minister: The power currently exists in relation to those who are suspected of terrorism, but not of hostile state activity. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will be looking urgently at the most appropriate legislative vehicle to bring that power forward.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The Prime Minister was right to point out that this is simply the latest act by a criminal rogue state. We remember the Malaysia Airlines jet that was shot down, the invasion of Crimea and the support for the murderous regime in Syria. I fully support her position, and I am horrified by the statement that has been read out on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition's spokesman. I should like to add my voice to those who have asked the Prime Minister to look quickly and seriously at financial sanctions for individuals closely associated with the Putin regime, as well as for the wider Russian economy.

The Prime Minister: We look at all the tools available across the board, but we operate within the rule of law, and there are certain criteria that need to be met if sanctions are to be applied.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and I look forward to her aggressively chasing down that dirty Russian money. There have now been 15 suspicious deaths, and I should like to ask about the prevalence of these deaths in the UK. Are there more in the UK than in similar western countries? If so, why? Is it because we have more Russians here, or because Russia is deliberately targeting the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I would just caution the hon. Gentleman when he describes all those deaths as suspicious. I believe that one of the families involved have made it very clear that they do not consider there to have been any suspicion around the death of their loved one. If the police believe that it is right to reopen cases, they will do so. It is up to them to make that operational decision.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her calibrated, proportionate and robust response. Will she join me in paying tribute to the brave British intelligence agents who serve our country? In the light of the increasingly violent and erratic approach of the Russian state, does she agree that if there needs to be a reassessment of their personal security here in the UK, that should take place without delay?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in welcoming, congratulating and thanking all those who work for our security and intelligence agencies for the valuable work that they do for us on a day-to-day basis. Each of those agencies will consistently ensure that they are considering the safety of their staff. They recognise the important work that those people do and how important it is to ensure that they are safe.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Russia has consistently behaved in this manner over a long period, but that has not stopped the elite of our major sporting organisations, such as the IOC and the proven-to-be-corrupt FIFA regime under Sepp Blatter, from allocating major sports tournaments to Russia. Does the Prime Minister agree that the elite in our sport need to look at themselves and not isolate themselves from human rights issues and criminal law when they allocate major tournaments?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will know that the elite in certain sporting organisations have found themselves under scrutiny in a variety of ways

over recent years, but it is important that we all have a care towards human rights issues and other matters when such things are being considered.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's robust and proportionate statement. Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), the Leader of the Opposition's spokesperson seems to have suggested that there is some parallel between Salisbury and Iraq. Will the Prime Minister confirm that, while no weapons of mass destruction were ever found in Iraq, three people are in hospital because chemical weapons were used in Salisbury? Will she also give us an update on their condition?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. We are talking about the use of a chemical weapon—a military-grade nerve agent—against people here in the United Kingdom. That is very clear. It is wrong and outrageous that the Leader of the Opposition's spokesman has made those comments.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): The horrendous incident in Salisbury has placed a huge unforeseen burden on local police. We know that the police service has faced unprecedented cuts, so I wonder whether the Prime Minister can give an assurance that the additional burden will be met from central resources and that it will not fall to the local police to pick up the bill.

The Prime Minister: The initial response to the incident was of course taken by Wiltshire police. When the nature of the incident became clear, the force was able to draw on support from neighbouring forces and, crucially, the counter-terrorism capability came into place. Counter-terrorism police have taken on and are running the investigation. This is about not just the resources, but the capabilities that police officers and the counter-terrorism force have brought to bear in this instance.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Is the Prime Minister able to give any update on the treatment and health of the brave policeman who was harmed after going to help, and will she pay tribute to him?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to pay tribute to Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey. As I think I mentioned the other day, I believe he said that he was merely doing his job. That is the attitude that is taken by all our police officers on a daily basis no matter what danger they find themselves in. My understanding is that he remains seriously ill, but he is conscious and has been engaging with people.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister's reaction to the terrible incident in Salisbury is proportionate, appropriate and robust, but does she agree that we need to go further and set an example in this House? All right hon. and hon. Members should immediately and permanently desist from appearing on any Russian propagandist channels, including RT and Sputnik.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I have spoken about the actions that the Government can take, but there are actions that individual Members can also take to send a clear message.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): I strongly welcome my right hon. Friend's steadfastness and statesmanship in standing up to this Russian aggression. Does she agree that this attempted murder on our soil by the Russian state will not enrich the lives of a single Russian citizen at home in Russia, and that this is the autocrat's classic con trick down the years, externalising internal discontent with aggression abroad because the leader in question knows that he cannot and will never deliver the prosperity, freedom and democracy that the Russian people are so long overdue?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Not one person living in Russia will benefit or see their prosperity or life chances increase as a result of this action. This is about the Russian state; it is not about its care for the Russian people.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I condemn Russia for this attack. The Prime Minister will know that a strong Royal Navy is a strong deterrent against Russian aggression, so will she ensure that sufficient new money is provided, so that there are no cuts to the Royal Navy or the Royal Marines?

The Prime Minister: We have of course been providing extra funding to the Royal Navy and have been enhancing its fleet. Last summer, I was pleased to go on the new aircraft carrier *Queen Elizabeth*, which is a fine example not just of our Royal Navy's capability, but of this Government's commitment to defence.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and her robust defence of a rules-based international order. Too many people died in the 20th century to establish that order just to throw it away in the 21st century. Will she confirm what discussions we are having with the Republic of Ireland? Given that we share a common travel area—she has rightly referred to the border and the need for security there—what discussions does she plan to have to ensure that the whole border area is secure?

The Prime Minister: The common travel area and its operation are things that we discuss on a regular basis with the Irish Government. We have recently been looking at enhancing the security arrangements that we have put in place and we will continue to do so.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Prime Minister and all colleagues who have questioned her this afternoon.

Integrated Communities

2.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the Government's ambitious proposals to build strong, integrated communities, where people—whatever their background—can live, work, learn and socialise together based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities. The "Integrated Communities Strategy" Green Paper, published today, sets out a bold programme to deliver that vision.

Britain is a great place to live. We are one of the world's most successful multi-ethnic, multi-faith societies, and we should take huge pride in that diversity. However, as we have seen just this week with the abhorrent "punish a Muslim" letters, there is a determination among some to try to divide. I express my support for all those who have received these hateful letters, including the hon. Members for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin). While there is a lot for us to be proud of, there is also more to do to ensure that a diverse society does not mean a divided society. In too many parts of our country, the truth is that the norm is mistrust, anxiety and prejudice—things that prevent people from taking full advantage of the opportunities that living in Britain offers. We can no longer duck the issue if we are to ensure that this is a country that works for everyone. To that end, we have identified five factors that drive segregation in our communities.

First, too many schools are segregated, even where the local population is very diverse, and unregulated settings outside school can also, on occasion, expose children to harmful views.

Secondly, there is residential segregation. In 2011, 41% of ethnic minorities lived in wards where white British people were a minority—an increase from 25% just 10 years ago. That reduces opportunities for people to mix and form meaningful relationships with those from different backgrounds.

Thirdly, disproportionately high levels of unemployment and economic inactivity reduce social mobility and can increase isolation. Sixty per cent. of women of Bangladeshi and Pakistani ethnicity are inactive in the labour market compared with a quarter of their white peers.

Fourthly, at the last census, as many as 770,000 adults in England could not speak English well or at all. Without a good understanding of our language, it is difficult for anyone to take full advantage of the opportunities available to them, and I know from personal experience just how much of a difference it made for my mother when she learned to speak English more than a decade after moving here from Pakistan.

Fifthly, there is a lack of meaningful mixing between people from different backgrounds. Evidence suggests that black, white and Asian Britons take up only about half the opportunities open to them to mix socially with people of an ethnicity different from their own. All that adds up to a conflict between religious, personal and cultural attitudes, and British values, causing increased tensions within and between communities. Women and girls are often at the greatest disadvantage.

[Sajid Javid]

The Green Paper sets out a framework of national priority actions to address the drivers of poor integration and to put forward a localised approach. In doing so, it sets out how we will facilitate recent migrants' integration into their communities and how we will improve communities' ability to adapt to migration. Success will depend on strong leadership, at both the national and local level. To ensure that the Government are leading by example, I am asking all Whitehall Departments to review their policies and to identify areas where they could do more to support integration. For example, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will review the Life in the UK test to see whether it could be amended to strengthen its focus on the values and principles of the UK, by which we are all expected to live.

The Green Paper includes proposals to ensure that every child receives an education that prepares them for life in modern Britain. That means giving them the opportunity to mix and form lasting relationships with those from different backgrounds and making sure they receive a rounded education that promotes British values across the curriculum. To protect children and young people from being exposed to views that undermine our shared values, my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary will publish proposals to strengthen the enforcement policy for independent schools that fail to meet the required standard. He will also review whether Ofsted's powers can be strengthened in relation to unregistered schools. We will stand up against undue pressure or harassment of school leaders who, having consulted, set reasonable policies that promote integration.

On employment, the Green Paper outlines how Jobcentre Plus will trial new approaches to break down the barriers to employment and support people from isolated communities into work. However, the truth is that a person must be able to speak English not only to find a job and prosper, but to play a full role in society. That is why we are proposing to develop a new strategy for English language in England and launch a new community-based English language programme.

The Green Paper also takes a robust approach to hate crime—a vile attack not just on individuals but on the tolerant and generous values that underpin British society. The Green Paper proposes strengthening local partnerships, so that they can identify and adopt the most effective approaches to tackling hate crime and encourage more people to report it. But it is clearly not enough to stamp out hate. We need to build hope and stronger communities, which the Green Paper aims to do through initiatives such as the integration innovation fund. That fund will allow organisations to bid to test out approaches to bring people together around shared activities and community spaces.

None of these measures dilutes the Government's commitment to protect people's legitimate rights to free speech and to practise their religion within the law. Indeed, the Green Paper reaffirms that commitment. But we cannot and will not shy away from challenging cultural practices that are harmful, particularly for women and girls. Recent news about the abuses in Telford highlights just how important the issue is.

We will also expand our Strengthening Faith Institutions programme to help a wider range of faith institutions to tighten up their governance structures, including promoting the participation of women and young people. We will

support training of faith leaders to practise in the British context by ensuring they understand the British legal system, British culture and our shared values. The recent independent review of sharia law also recommended amending marriage legislation to ensure that civil marriages are conducted before or at the same time as the religious marriage ceremony. The Government share the concerns raised in the review and support that principle and recommendation. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice will explore the legal and practical challenges of limited reform to the law to reflect that.

We recognise that issues play out differently in different places and for different people, so we are going to work with five very different parts of the country: Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Peterborough, Walsall, and Waltham Forest, to develop local integration strategies and to learn how we can best address the challenges on the ground. The overall aim is to develop a set of integration measures at a local and a national level, so that we can assess what really works.

It is a sign of a mature, confident society that we can discuss these issues without lazy stereotyping or oversensitivity. I look forward to a constructive debate with all those in the House and beyond who want to focus on what unites rather than divides us. We should be guided by the evidence and an acknowledgement that we all have a role to play—both new arrivals in making a new life here, and existing communities in supporting them.

As the proud son of immigrants whose parents worked hard to get on and give something back, I want everyone in Britain to enjoy the same opportunities—to celebrate where they come from, while playing a full and proper role in British society; to see people from all backgrounds mixing freely and without fear; and to ensure that everyone, regardless of whether they are a new arrival or can trace their ancestry back to the Norman conquest, feels proud to call this country their home. The Green Paper proposes an ambitious programme of action across the Government to help achieve just that. I commend it to the House.

2.36 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his oral statement and for bringing to the House the Government's long-awaited integration strategy. From the start, I want to echo his comments on the "punish a Muslim" letters. The individuals who sent those have no place in society. We must do much more in the House to speak for the power of diversity and the power of the contribution of people of all backgrounds to enrich all our lives.

In December 2016, we were told that the Secretary of State was studying the report's findings very closely and that the Government's strategy would appear in the new year. Fifteen months later, I hope the delay in publishing has given the Secretary of State sufficient time to reflect and produce a robust strategy. I welcome his decision to visit an adult learning centre in Waltham Forest this morning—a Labour council that, despite having seen its budgets slashed, is working hard for its community. The Government have much to learn from the work being done there. Imagine how much these vital services could achieve across the country if they were properly funded! The money that the Secretary of State has committed today to that authority will go far in supporting its English for speakers of other languages, or ESOL, programme.

Breaking down the barriers that exist between communities is the best tool we have to challenge hostility and mistrust. We welcome the Government's re-focus on English language provision, but these actions do little to reverse the massive cuts that have been implemented by the Government. According to the House of Commons Library, between 2009-10 and 2015-16, funding for ESOL fell in real terms from £222 million to just £90 million. It is unclear what proportion of the £50 million will be used to reverse those cuts, but it is clear that it will not be enough to undo the damage. We recognise how important it is for people arriving in the UK to be able to speak English, but cuts to the sector have left it in a dangerous state of disrepair. Although the new funding is welcome, we need to go further. We have committed to re-establishing ESOL classes and making them free at the point of use for all those who need them.

In her report, Dame Louise Casey said:

"The problem has not been a lack of knowledge but a failure of collective, consistent and persistent will to do something about it or give it the priority it deserves at both a national and local level".

It is disappointing, then, that today the Government have announced not a new policy, but rather another consultation for a potential policy—and one that is to be implemented not nationally, but among a small selection of target areas. It seems that that disappointment was shared by Dame Louise. On the "Today" programme this morning, she said:

"it will take more than £50 million over two years and is something the whole country will have to embrace. The differences in the country at the moment are too great and we need something that heals the nation."

Dame Louise said in her report:

"The work that has been done has often been piecemeal and lacked a clear evidence base or programme of evaluation."

Again, she was disappointed on that today. On the "Today" programme, she said she had hoped for "big bold strategies that make seismic change".

She also mentioned the rough sleeping unit that she headed up under the last Labour Government:

"We ended the need for people to sleep rough on the streets of this country, we drastically reduced antisocial behaviour... I would like to see coming out of their strategy something on that level."

Also on this point, the Government need to ensure that the work they propose in this Green Paper is supported by evidence and involves a proper system of evaluation. I would welcome it if the Secretary of State provided details on that today.

The Casey review also refers to the rise in hate crime since the EU referendum—it soared by 41% after the vote. I know the Secretary of State will join me in condemning those who have stoked violence, but I am sure that he also agrees that there needs to be greater respect among Members of this House, because we should be leading by example on this.

On education, mixing with children from other backgrounds and religions throughout school life is indeed one of the best ways of preventing barriers from being erected in the first place. A former No. 10 aide said that instead of simply learning about British values of tolerance, children should be living them. How will the Secretary of State ensure that children mix with all cultures and religions, given that the new Education Secretary recently suggested he was in favour of ditching the 50% cap on religious admissions to new over-subscribed faith schools? Also, will the Housing, Communities and

Local Government Secretary commit to subjecting independent schools to community impact assessments?

I hope that today's announcement signals a new commitment from the whole Government, but an integration innovation fund to make better use of shared community spaces such as parks and libraries will do little for many communities in which those facilities have closed because of Government cuts. This strategy should be a blueprint for the type of society we wish our children to grow up in. It should be bold, ambitious and, as Dame Louise has said, "backed with serious funding". We welcome the broad thrust of the strategy as a welcome, overdue, small first step. Despite our criticism that it lacks some of the ambition we would like—we want the strategy's approach to be deeper and wider—there are some positive ideas in the statement. The true test will be whether there is rigorous evaluation, and if any successful strategy is given the backing and money to expand into all areas so that extremism—both Islamist and far right—can be consigned to history, and we can go forward with a diverse, not divided, Britain.

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and for broadly welcoming the strategy. She started by mentioning the work that Dame Louise Casey has done for years on this subject, including through the report that she published. Let me take this opportunity to thank Dame Louise again for what she has done. That valuable report was an important input into the development of the strategy, as was evidence from other sources. From what I have seen from Dame Louise Casey today, she has welcomed the strategy. Of course, there are things that she might have done differently, but she has broadly welcomed it, and I thank her for that.

The hon. Lady went on to mention the English language. Once again, I welcome her support in understanding that this is a major issue. We must do much more to support people who have settled in our country but speak no or little English to learn that language, for all the obvious reasons. She mentioned my visit today to the Queens Road learning centre in Walthamstow. I was very impressed with how it is run and with the people I met who have, within just a year, learnt an incredible amount of English. They talked to me about how that had transformed their lives, and I am very supportive of such activity, which is why I am pleased that a part of our plan is to help more communities to provide that kind of teaching.

The hon. Lady also mentioned funding for English language teaching. Of course funding is important, but this is about more than just that. We have committed today, for the first time, to ensure that this is a national strategy across all Departments, so for example my Department, the Home Office and the Department for Education will work together with one goal of helping people to learn English. We are also making use of community groups, which can often get to those people who need to learn English in a much more practical and sensible way than perhaps under the traditional approach. That is why we are keen to use these five pilot areas that we have named. We recognise that there is not a one-size-fits-all policy. We will need different approaches to achieve the same objectives, and we should be led by the evidence. I am glad that the hon. Lady agrees that everything should be led by evidence.

[Sajid Javid]

The hon. Lady also rightly condemned hate crime of all types. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), stood at this Dispatch Box just a couple of days ago to outline the Government's hate crime strategy and how we will build on that. The hon. Lady speaks for everyone in this House when she says that hate crime of any type is unacceptable. I agree with her that people in this House should set an example, and that applies to all types of hate crime—hate crime against Muslims and anti-Semitic hate crime.

Lastly, the hon. Lady mentioned faith schools and schooling more generally. She will recall that my statement referred to segregation in schools. This is not an issue just for some faith schools; it is equally an issue for non-faith schools and in many parts of the education sector. That is why I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary has agreed not only to review what can be done, but to work with the pilot areas immediately to determine what strategies can be developed locally to try to reduce segregation. I believe that this is the first time a Government have committed to do that.

My last comment is to welcome the hon. Lady's recognition that this is a strategy for the whole Government. This has not been done before under successive Governments. We recognise that almost every Department—some clearly more than others—has a role to play in building a more integrated and cohesive society.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I join my right hon. Friend in utterly condemning the “punish a Muslim” letters? Having read the text, I am appalled, and I hope that our Government will ensure that the full force of the law is put behind finding the senders of these letters and ensuring that they are punished. I think that the whole House will join in condemning the appalling way in which certain Members have been specifically targeted.

I welcome the Green Paper and the funding, and my right hon. Friend's determination to ensure that social integration can be advanced, particularly by enabling people to speak English. I find that it is often the older members of my local Muslim community in Chesham who have not managed to achieve any great fluency in English. Many of them are women, and they are often not aware of their rights and cannot play a full part in society. What does my right hon. Friend propose so that we are able to reach older members of our communities and enable them to get the fluency in English that they should have?

Sajid Javid: First, may I join my right hon. Friend in condemning the hate crime letters that we have all heard about this week? A live police investigation is under way and I reassure her that the full force of the law will be used to find the perpetrators and ensure that they are punished.

My right hon. Friend talked about English language learning, particularly among older members of communities. She is right that that can be harder for someone who has been here for perhaps 40 or 50 years and still does not speak English properly. In trying to encourage such people to take up English, we wish to

expand the process of getting other members of their community—perhaps even those of the same age group—to encourage them into settings that might be familiar and to work with them. That might be a slower process than getting them into a place such as a college to learn English, but if it is a method that works, it is what we will support.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I start by condemning the letters that have been mentioned. The Scottish National party condemns hate crime and extremism of all kinds.

While the SNP welcomes all action to promote integration, this Government really have a cheek, because 15 months on from the Casey report, Refugee Action has dubbed this Green Paper

“all mouth and no trousers”

without new money for ESOL, as its funding has been cut by 60% in England over the past five years. What research have the Government done into austerity's impact on integration? The Secretary of State mentioned Jobcentre Plus, and I can tell him Jobcentre Plus asked one of my constituents to stop her ESOL class and go into work. It is ludicrous that this is happening.

This Government have pandered to tabloids and stoked up anti-immigration rhetoric for years, so they should apologise for their part in this. After all, this is a Government of “Go Home” vans; of the hostile environment; of impoverishing and making destitute asylum seekers, preventing them from working, which we know would aid integration; of deeming highly skilled migrants a threat to national security under paragraph 322(5) of the immigration rules; and of the Brexit shambles, which makes EU nationals feel so unwelcome that they are leaving the country they have made home.

We are working hard in Scotland to counter that narrative, because it really matters. Our New Scots refugee integration strategy seeks integration from day one. It is a two-way process. We would like immigration law to be devolved so that we can do more. We welcome those who have done us the honour of making Scotland their home, and I take this opportunity to thank each and every one of them, because we do not do that enough.

The Scottish Government's strategy was drawn up in consultation with more than 700 refugees and asylum seekers. Does the Secretary of State intend to consult similarly? We allow asylum seekers in Scotland to learn English for free and encourage community-based learning, as happens in Nan McKay hall in my constituency, where some of those who came through the door for ESOL classes are now members of the board of that organisation. We have a community response through Refuweegee, and the people at Code Your Future want to teach coding skills to new migrants. The Scottish Refugee Council encourages people to take a cup of tea with a refugee. What consultation has the Secretary of State done with the Scottish Government, especially in respect of the life in the UK test? Will he look to Scotland for all our ideas of civilisation?

Sajid Javid: It is a shame that the hon. Lady took such an unconstructive attitude. This vital issue concerns everyone throughout the country. Of course, the policies that I have set out today primarily affect England,

although some issues, such as the life in the UK test, are UK-wide. Despite the attitude taken by the hon. Lady, we stand ready to work with the Scottish Government to further our joint goal of a more integrated society.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend on his statement and the manner in which he has presented it. I join others in condemning the terrible atrocities that Members from across the House have suffered as a result of hate crimes committed against them.

Some 161 languages are spoken in my constituency in our schools alone. My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee conducted a brief inquiry into the Casey review, and I suspect that we will return to this subject again.

One problem that my right hon. Friend has not mentioned is that children are often withheld from schooling. Children who are in schools learn English rapidly and become part and parcel of society; children who do not go to school and are withdrawn from education often do not pick up English very quickly, if at all. That means that they are not able to play their full part in society. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what he will do to make sure that young children who are withdrawn from education are properly educated and mix with other children, so that they get the opportunity to integrate into society?

Sajid Javid: I commend my hon. Friend on his remarks. I note that he represents what is probably one of the most diverse constituencies in the country, and it is all the richer and culturally stronger for that. He raised the particular issue of English and schooling. He is quite right—the evidence shows this—that some people abuse the freedoms that we give to schooling by taking their children out of the education system altogether and sending them to unregistered schools, which raises all sorts of issues, not least about the safeguarding of those children. We have committed in the Green Paper to a review by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education of the guidelines on home schooling and the requirements to have all schools registered, and he will also look at Ofsted's powers.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's proposals, particularly in the context of Bradford, where we met previously. Bradford is doing some great work on integration, whether through the Science and Media Museum's gaming festival, the literature festival or, indeed, Bradford's curry festival. The truth is, though, that this Government's cuts of more than £130 million to ESOL provision have decimated the local infrastructure available to deliver the plans that he is talking about. What assurances can he give that my city will not be left with a shoestring budget with which to deliver this vision of his?

Sajid Javid: I assure the hon. Lady that we share the same goals. I know that she cares deeply about this, as we have spoken about these kinds of issues before. As she knows, Bradford is one of our pilot areas, and we have already started work there. It does not have to wait; this has already started. Bradford will have access to new funding for that work, and we want to work with people there to innovate. We want to listen to their

ideas, because they are the people on the ground who are dealing with these issues day in, day out. The hon. Lady is right to refer to resources, which are of course important, but practice and how things are done are equally important, and we want to learn from that, too.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On sharia councils, how do we protect people who are ignorant of their rights or subject to peer pressure in closed communities?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend asks a good question. Once he gets a chance to read the Green Paper more closely, he will see that we have set out a programme of how we want to make sure that more people, including imams in mosques, make people aware of their rights. If we have to take direct action to prohibit something—I gave the example of a change in marriage law, and in that case we would need to make sure that women in particular were not being abused and taken advantage of—we will not hesitate to do so.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): There is much in the direction of the proposals to support. The Secretary of State is right to refer to the central importance of women to the development of the strategy. I have seen some superb examples of best practice locally, including work with supplementary schools and with parents through Sure Start centres, as well as other forms of outreach, including the kind of peer-to-peer approach to which the Secretary of State referred. He is, however, completely wrong to say that all this is about more than money. Local authorities need the capacity to sort out such outreach work and to ensure that, whether it is done through community groups or the local councils themselves, it is able to happen. When will he make sure that councils have the resources that they need to turn what is a consensual vision on integration into practical reality?

Sajid Javid: To be clear to the hon. Lady, I am not saying that money is unimportant. Proper funding is of course essential but, equally, using that funding appropriately and in the most efficient way is just as important. She refers to examples from throughout the country. Where councils and community groups have done good work already, they should continue to do that work and we should all learn from that.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I am grateful for the Secretary of State's statement. I also wish to highlight the importance of women, especially because they, too, educate their children. What work has my right hon. Friend done to look into how he can reach women in a healthcare setting so that, as he outlined in his statement, the messages cut across Departments?

Sajid Javid: I said earlier that this is a cross-Government strategy, and that includes work with the Department of Health and Social Care. In putting together the strategy, we have looked at ways—through local councils or community groups, for example—to make sure that people, particularly women, in some of these communities are aware of their health rights and what is available. One example is that as the Department for Work and Pensions rolls out universal credit, more and more people come into contact with the system and register for the first time, and we are able to look into ways to use that

[Sajid Javid]

information to ensure that we can help more people, especially those to whom other services can perhaps be offered, to ensure that they get those offers.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Back in 2001, we had the race riots, followed by the council report, and we have heard all this before from different Governments, including the current one. How can we be guaranteed that the strategy will actually make a difference? When will the Government address the fact that, for legitimate and sensible reasons, people chose to live segregated lives? What are the Government going to do to try to make them integrate rather than choose segregation?

Sajid Javid: We should not be allowing people to choose to live segregated lives; that is not something that will help them, especially in the long term. It is not good for them and it is not good for the rest of society, and that is really at the heart of the strategy. We cannot force people to integrate—of course not—but the Government can do a lot, working with local government, community groups and others, to encourage people to integrate. The hon. Gentleman is right that Governments have tried this in the past, and they have had some success, but I believe that this is the boldest, most far-reaching strategy that has been presented by any Government.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I unreservedly condemn the hateful letters sent to Muslim MPs, including the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) in my county.

In South West Bedfordshire, we have some wonderful examples of the integration of the Traveller community, particularly where they live among settled residents, with the children attending school and the parents getting into work. I remind both my colleagues on the Front Bench—the Secretaries of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and for Education—that the race disparity audit showed that the Traveller community in this country has the worst outcomes. I say gently to them both that our planning policy does not help in that respect, providing as it does unnecessary separation. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that his welcome proposal will include the Traveller community to make sure that they are properly integrated for the benefit of everyone?

Sajid Javid: I can assure my hon. Friend that when we talk about integration it is about all communities, not one or two, and including, of course, the Traveller community. He is right to point to the race disparity audit, an important piece of work that showed these kind of disparities, especially in education standards for children from the Traveller community, which are not where anyone would want them to be. We are taking action through the race disparity audit work, and my hon. Friend may be aware that we will shortly publish a consultation on planning issues regarding the Traveller community.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his condemnation of the literature that I, colleagues and other members of the Muslim community have received. I also welcome

the tone of his statement: in the past, certain kinds of proposals were reflected in a way that stigmatised certain communities, particularly the British Muslim community. Does he agree that fundamental to promoting integration is providing security and protection to minority communities, so that they have the confidence to live together with others? In many parts of the country, especially where there are small numbers, and given the rising level of hate crime, people still do not have that confidence. I welcome the cross-Government strategy to make sure that protection against discrimination will get a high priority as part of the programme alongside the other measures.

Sajid Javid: I again condemn the hate crime letters that have been sent to so many people, including the hon. Lady and other hon. Members. As I have said, that is unacceptable in every way, and I assure her that the authorities are doing everything they can to find the perpetrators and punish them for what they have done.

The hon. Lady is correct in her point about giving people protection and confidence. I have seen examples of that throughout my life but especially in my research in preparing the Green Paper. In fact, the visit I made today to Waltham Forest showed me that, and it was great to hear the stories of the women I met about how they have built up confidence to meet others, to learn English and how that has transformed their lives.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Dame Louise Casey and Amanda Spielman, who have taken on difficult integration issues with real guts. My right hon. Friend will be aware of my political background in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and my serious concerns—shared by children's services officers—about the integration and oversight of a portion of children who are home educated. While I appreciate the work and dedication of the genuine home-educating community and their right to make that choice, will he consider implementing a ban on the home education of children in households that contain a member who has been convicted of any terrorist-related or hate crime offence?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that I know she did to promote integration and community cohesion as a councillor in Tower Hamlets. She raises the important issue of people abusing the valuable right to choose home education for their children, and that is why, under the strategy that my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary has set out, we will review the guidelines for home education and particularly look at those instances—there is evidence of them already—in which people claim to be home educating their children but are in fact sending them to unregistered, unregulated schools, which is clearly a bad outcome for those children.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I broadly welcome the strategy and the opportunities it provides to Bradford to become a more cohesive place for all. I urge the Government to make sure that their aims and ambitions are matched by sufficient funding to make them a reality. I also ask the Secretary of State to realise that the root cause of many of these problems is a lack of opportunity. There are too few good jobs, low levels of educational attainment and, ultimately, too many

people living in poverty. If we truly want more integrated communities, we have to deal with those fundamental issues.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is right to raise the importance of opportunities and how having a more integrated society will help with that, particularly learning English, but it is about a lot more than that and other skills are required as well. It is good that we have a strong economy with more people—including more women—employed than ever before. That is a prerequisite, but of course there is a lot more to do, and I hope she agrees that the strategy will help.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I join colleagues in condemning the letters that have been received by other hon. Members. An attack on one MP for doing their job is an attack on every single one of us and our democracy.

During my time in Coventry, I saw at first hand what faith communities could do to bring people together, and I spoke at temples about my faith. What role does my right hon. Friend see faith communities, especially groups such as the Church of England, playing in delivering this strategy?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend gives me an opportunity to thank and congratulate so many faith communities of every faith that do so much to bring people together. I have seen some excellent examples, whether in schools or through mosques, churches and temples. I hope that those faith communities that are already doing good work and have good practice will bid for some of the funds under the strategy, especially the innovation fund, and benefit themselves as well as allowing others to see what they can do.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I endorse all the comments that have been made about the appalling letters. I also welcome the publication of this strategy, not least because it incorporates many of the recommendations of the all-party parliamentary group on social integration of which my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) are members. I also welcome the fact that the Secretary of State acknowledges that integration is a two-way street and does not fall into the trap of conflating integration with counter-terror, which has been deeply unhelpful in the past.

It is so important that we emphasise that the three-quarters of a million people he refers to who are not fully proficient in English want to learn English. The fact that they do not know English well is not because they do not want to. Just like the Secretary of State's mother, they want to learn English. Much of our discourse across the House today has looked at divisions along racial, immigration and religious lines, but the divisions go beyond that. We have major divisions between the different generations and, most importantly, we cannot forget the big divisions between socio-economic classes in our country. I hope that in the implementation of the strategy he will take that on board and look at integration holistically, bringing in all the characteristics that sometimes divide us from each other, but on the whole, I think this is a very positive move by the Government.

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those comments and for the work that he has done as the chair of the APPG on integration. When the report he referred to was published I read it carefully, and it has helped me and my team to develop the strategy today, so I welcome the work that he has done and continues to do on this important issue. He is right to emphasise that it is a two-way street—I agree and it is in the strategy. This is all about community integration and building cohesion, not about extremism, and he is right to emphasise that.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about people wanting to learn English. Of course, a small minority will not see the advantage of doing so, but it is our job to make sure they realise how it can really help them, and so we have a role to play there. I saw a fantastic example in Waltham Forest this morning, where all the women I met were so eager to learn and to show off how well they could speak English after only a year or so. That was good to see.

The hon. Gentleman was also right on his final point about breaking down divisions and taking what he rightly described as a holistic approach, rather than a narrow one, and I very much agree with him on that.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. As someone who grew up in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, I remember the importance of voluntary societies' work in helping to reach out across communities. During the Afghanistan war, many brave local people helped to support the British Army, acting as translators, and some needed to be evacuated as they were at risk themselves. Three families came to Chelmsford. The fathers spoke English, but the three women did not. The local women in Chelmsford reached out and started a project called English for Women, which now meets three mornings a week. Many dozens of families and women help, as do lots of retired teachers. It is a cross-communities and cross-faiths project and a fantastic example. Would my right hon. Friend consider visiting it and helping to twin such organisations with other volunteer organisations across the country?

Sajid Javid: I will absolutely consider visiting Chelmsford and learning for myself about English for Women. It sounds as if the project has done fantastic work, and those lessons can be learnt by others. I encourage the group to make an application to our new innovation fund, as it sounds as if it could very much do with that help.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Hon. Members would be forgiven for wondering what on earth the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross would have to say about this matter. Nevertheless, over the years a great number of Poles have come to live and work in my constituency and the Scottish highlands, making a very important contribution to our local economy. We are extremely grateful and they have integrated extremely well. The Department for Education has played a hugely important role in achieving this, particularly with teaching English, but I want to mention the police force. Police Scotland has worked extremely hard to build up the confidence of the Polish community, which is very important to highly effective policing. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is crucial that local police forces in other parts of the

[Jamie Stone]

UK have the confidence of ethnic groups, that they build on that confidence and that action should be taken—encouraged by Her Majesty's Government—when there could be improvement in building up that confidence?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman on the importance of ensuring that the local police force, wherever that might be, is seen as very much a part of the local community. After all, we police by consent in this country. That is a valuable principle that means ensuring that all communities feel that the police are there for them. I have discussed this subject with the Home Secretary, who equally takes this to be an important matter. It is one of those issues that we should continue always to look at, to ensure that we are doing the best thing possible.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): I echo the sentiments and statements made by my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna). Will the Secretary of State tell me what equality impact assessment has been made on funding for the five pilot areas? One of those areas is my constituency of Peterborough. I note that the Secretary of State has said that he does not want further division, so I wish to ensure that funding is available.

Sajid Javid: It sounds like the hon. Lady welcomes the fact that Peterborough is one of the pilot areas, which is good to hear. We started work with Peterborough a while back and it is very keen to work with the Department. We have been working with Peterborough on ideas and it is clear that each initiative that it puts in place will have to be properly funded, and we look forward to working together on that basis.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the money being given to my borough, the Borough of Waltham Forest. Had the Secretary of State had the courtesy of giving me more than an hour's notice this morning, I would have happily joined him on his visit to my constituency to meet the women and, indeed, men of Walthamstow, where we have a strong track record of community engagement. I am sure that our community would have told him that we reject the dog-whistle politics that sees integration as a one-way street and that, as a community that has received the "punish a Muslim" letters, we have stood together to say that this is not in our name. But we would also have told him that the challenge to integration in our borough is not just about being able to speak the same language; it is also about having the time to put down roots and get to know each other—something that spiralling rents and house prices put at risk. Will he commit to tracking what impact churn and housing tenure have on integration, and will he join us all in looking at how we can have longer and more secure tenancies to give people the opportunity to know that good neighbours can become good friends?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can give the hon. Lady that assurance. First, let me apologise. It is completely unacceptable and wrong if she only got one hour's notice of my visit this morning. I was hoping to see her there, but I now know why that was not possible. I assure her that I was

very impressed by what I saw at the Queens Road learning centre, where I met the council leaders responsible for the programme. I would like to see more of that activity across the country, not just in Waltham Forest and the pilot areas. She is right about helping people to put down roots and learn from other members of their community. As an example, as well as the ESOL classes I saw at the Queens Road learning centre, there was a group called "community chat", which is designed to help people not just to learn English, but to make friends and make them more comfortable in their local community.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): As an MP for Bradford, I enthusiastically welcome this statement. I invite the Secretary of State to Keighley, which is the jewel in the crown of Bradford, to view progress at a later date. A day's notice will be fine. Does he agree that it is particularly important that parents in Keighley and Bradford can speak English, so that they can guide their children at school and in their choice of friends, careers and so on? Does he also agree that it is important that churches and mosques that quite rightly promote the value of family life get behind this promotion of English teaching?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Anna Soubry.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con) *rose—*

Sajid Javid *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Oh, I am sorry. I meant to call the Secretary of State.

Sajid Javid: I thought you were calling me Anna Soubry there, Madam Deputy Speaker. [*Laughter.*]

I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of mosques, churches, temples and other faith institutions, and the role that they can play not just in serving their faith communities, but in building cohesion. As I mentioned in response to an earlier question, I have seen many examples of that. They have an important role to play when it comes to learning English, particularly in encouraging those who might otherwise be reluctant.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Anna Soubry.

Anna Soubry: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker; my apologies to the Secretary of State.

I have just heard that Round Hill Primary School has issued a letter to all its parents because some of its Muslim families have received these horrible and hateful letters. I know that the Secretary of State will join me in expressing his complete condemnation of that. Does he also agree that, although that is hate, a lot of this stems from the twin problems of ignorance and blind prejudice and that we should all—whatever community our lives touch—do everything that we can to get rid of that ignorance and prejudice that, in its extreme form, ends up with people sending horrible, hateful, very seriously criminal and offensive letters?

Sajid Javid: I join my right hon. Friend in condemning whoever may have sent those letters to the parents at the primary school in her constituency, and I extend my support to those parents. What she has outlined really goes to the heart of this strategy, which aims for everyone to recognise that, when we reduce segregation and build a better integrated society, we build more trust between

people, help them to get on better and help them to put aside any prejudices that they might have had. That is why it is so important that we see this strategy through.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Restoring the ESOL funding that has been cut since 2010 would be a really big way of improving integration. I was really pleased to see the Secretary of State for Education on the Treasury Bench during the statement, because I have a question about home education. Will the Secretary of State say a little bit more about the approach that he thinks is likely to be adopted? The last time that Parliament discussed home education and regulation, his party took a very firm view that they did not want any regulation at all. It is interesting to note that Government Front Benchers may have moved from that position, and I would be interested to know a little bit more about that.

Sajid Javid: The first thing to recognise is that home education is a valuable and important right, and that will not change. There are many examples of excellent home education, and we welcome those. But we have also, sadly, seen examples—some have been reported recently—where home education has led to a bad outcome for those children and has not helped them or wider society. There will be work across the Government, led by the Education Secretary, who will review the guidelines on home education and ensure that all children being home educated are properly registered. At this point, there is no register of who is being educated at home. We want to ensure that the rights that are very valuable to home education are not abused and that they are protected.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I agree with the Secretary of State on the role of faith groups in the pursuit of integration. Will he join me in congratulating the Well Project in my constituency, which is underpinned by the Caritas organisation in helping refugees and asylum seekers to integrate through the provision of English as an additional language and through women's and girls' leadership? I have to say on a practical level, though, that since the Government privatised the refugee and asylum resettlement project, services have gone backwards. There is a lack of spatial planning, local authorities are being cut out of the equation, and there is no integration with the rest of civil society. We are going to have to work 10 times as hard to catch up with the model we used to have.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman raises the important issue of resettlement. He might be interested to know that one of the policies that we will be reviewing through the Green Paper is about providing the support that is given to people who rightly and legitimately settle in this country on a long-term basis, because we have tended to have an approach, under successive Governments, where once people have their leave to remain, they are left on their own. It is very important to have an approach where they are constantly provided with

information and helped along with the process—perhaps a process that eventually leads to citizenship. I am pleased that the Home Secretary will be reviewing that.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I congratulate this House on its total cross-party condemnation of the vile messages that have gone to some of our colleagues. There is no place in this country for such prejudice and hate.

Broadly, I welcome this national strategy. I am extremely pleased that Blackburn with Darwen is going to be a pilot area. As I am sure the Secretary of State is aware, we have a number of fantastic examples of where the communities have integrated, and we are constantly working towards that. I have spent my whole political life working on cohesion and integration for Blackburn because that adds value to the town and to the people and makes it a better place in which to live and work. Will the Secretary of State clarify how the resources will be used, because in tackling integration we also need to tackle social and economic issues? I plead with him to come to Blackburn and share some of the experiences of our communities.

Sajid Javid: Let me take this opportunity to thank the hon. Lady for all the work she has been doing for Blackburn, and long before she became a Member of this House, as the former leader on community cohesion and integration. That work is well known to my Department and Ministers, but also among wider communities that have looked at the experience of Blackburn. She has set a real example and I thank her for that. This is one of the reasons Blackburn is a pilot area. We think that it has been especially innovative in this regard and can do more. We want to work with it but we also want others to learn from it.

The hon. Lady mentioned resources for social and economic issues. The Green Paper talks about resources specifically for integration. However, that will help to leverage in other funding that is available for skills, perhaps, through the Department for Work and Pensions or the Department for Education and others. That is an important way to look at the resources that will be available.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees, I welcome the Government's integration strategy, as we recommended one in our inquiry last year. I will send the Secretary of State a copy of the report of that inquiry, which looks at refugees who so desperately want to work and contribute to the economy of our country—the country that has granted them asylum. Will he consider meeting me to discuss how some of the more granular points in the inquiry's findings relate to his strategy?

Sajid Javid: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): A perfect ending.

Supervised Drug Consumption Facilities

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

3.24 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about supervised drug consumption facilities; to make it lawful to take controlled substances within such facilities in specified circumstances; and for connected purposes.

On Monday, one of my constituents mentioned to me that Glasgow already has drug consumption facilities: they are behind the bushes near his flat and in his close when it rains. Right now, they are also in bin shelters, on filthy waste ground and in lonely back lanes. They are in public toilets and in stolen spaces where intravenous drug users can grasp the tiniest modicum of dignity and privacy for as long as it takes to prepare and inject their fix. Often they are alone, and, far too regularly, drug users will die as a result. As a society, we can and must do much better than that.

There is a real and persistent issue in Glasgow. In 2016, 2,593 opioid-related deaths were registered in England and Wales. In that same year, 867 were registered in Scotland, and of those, 257 were in the city of Glasgow. We have an ageing population of people with long-term problem drug use. They are increasingly vulnerable and require particular interventions to reduce harm and encourage them to engage, and remain engaged, in health services. The largest cohort of drug users in Scotland are currently aged 35 to 44. This ageing population—people who have survived since starting to take drugs in the 1980s and 1990s—are in deteriorating health. Owing to their sustained opiate use, they are assessed as having a physiological age 15 years greater than their actual age. They have complex co-morbidities, with above population-level instances of conditions including COPD—chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—and asthma, hepatitis C, liver disease, epilepsy, deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism, skin infections and cellulitis, depression and psychosis. This population is vulnerable to overdose and to emergency hospital admission.

The Scottish Drugs Forum has carried out research interviews with a large group of older people with a drug problem. This group feel very strongly that they have been left behind—that they are seen as a waste of space. This House needs to recognise that abstinence-based programmes will not necessarily work for everyone and that harm reduction and support will be better and more worthwhile interventions for a group of people who have not managed to eliminate drug use in the preceding decades. Evidence shows that long-term engagement in treatment is a positive protective factor. The people in Glasgow who would use this facility are not in treatment. The facility would get them through the door and would provide a range of other social and medical support to help them to stabilise their lives.

The report, “Reducing Opioid-Related Deaths in the UK”, published in December 2016 by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, recommends that

“consideration be given—by the governments of each UK country and by local commissioners of drug treatment services—to the potential to reduce”

drug-related deaths

“and other harms through the provision of medically-supervised drug consumption clinics in localities with a high concentration of injecting drug use.”

The report cites evidence demonstrating that such facilities reduce injecting risk behaviours and overdose fatalities. Furthermore, it says:

“They have been estimated to save more money than they cost, due to the reductions in deaths and HIV infections that they produce...Such facilities have not been found to increase injecting, drug use or local crime rates. In addition to preventing overdose deaths, they can provide other benefits, such as reductions in blood-borne viruses, improved access to primary care and more intensive forms of drug treatment. No deaths from overdose have ever occurred in such facilities”.

Glasgow has a proposal—a well-worked-through business case produced by Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership, which is supported by the Scottish Government. Drugs law remains reserved to Westminster, and Scottish Ministers have requested permission from the Home Office to allow the proposal to go ahead. This has not yet been granted. This proposal has the real potential to reduce drug-related deaths and ongoing harm. It is for an integrated service, as also recommended by the ACMD—not just a “shooting gallery”, as some have suggested. It will allow engagement with a population who at the moment are not being assisted very well at all. There will be medically trained staff who can supervise and administer life-saving naloxone should it be required.

Some may say that this is an unnecessary expense. I say to Ministers on the Front Bench that it will certainly cost them nothing. For Glasgow, there is a significant cost in not doing this. There is a cost in treating the latest HIV outbreak and in treating hep C and other conditions. There is a cost in emergency hospital admissions and ambulance call-outs and in police time dealing with complaints. There is a significant cost in cleaning up discarded needles, with residents being charged by their factor for a problem not of their making and the council picking up the tab for public spaces. A housing association told me how it is regularly paying to clear up areas of hundreds of discarded syringes. A constituent tweeted me today to say that there are syringes on her doorstep. There is an ongoing public health risk to residents, who at any time could be pricked by a contaminated needle, and of course, there is the intangible cost in human lives. We should consider all those costs that we are currently paying in a situation that helps no one.

Heroin-assisted treatment has been mentioned as an alternative to a supervised drug consumption room, and I would like to touch on some of the limitations of that. The Glasgow proposal includes provision for heroin-assisted treatment, but I would like to stress that while it can be a treatment for those for whom many other interventions have failed, it is not suitable for everyone.

There are also capacity and cost issues. Glasgow city centre is thought to have a population in the region of 500 injecting drug users. The Glasgow city health and social care partnership believes that it would only have capacity for 40 to 60 individuals for heroin-assisted treatment, and only when the service was running to full capacity, which will not happen for some time. I understand that the service also requires two separate licences to operate: a premises licence, which is in the gift of the Home Office, and a prescriber’s licence,

dependent on the premises licence, for individual doctors directly linked to the site. It is not a simple process, but it has been developed very much alongside the proposal for a supervised drug consumption facility.

To operate a supervised drug consumption facility requires the consent of the Home Office. Those operating, working in and using the facility require protection in law, hence my Bill seeks to exempt staff and those using drugs within the facility from prosecution and remove liability for prosecution from the operators of the facility—in this case, the Glasgow city health and social care partnership.

The supporters of the Bill come from a range of parties: Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and even the Conservatives. A letter that I wrote to the Home Secretary earlier this year, ahead of the debate led by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), garnered similar cross-party support from MPs right across Scotland. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who said in giving his support that

“we should reach out to help those in the grip of drug abuse and do what can be done to help them escape the vile grip of the gangster pushers and dealers.”

This facility is very much a step in that direction.

In my 11 years as an elected member in Glasgow, the issue of drug taking has been a constant. I have seen various police initiatives shunt people around, from bin shelter to close to waste ground. I have seen the council clear up the mess at significant cost and significant risk to its workers. I have seen residents at their wit's end, worried about what they will open the door to in the morning, with blood, excrement and used syringes on their doorsteps daily. I have seen vulnerable and desperate women and men injecting into their groin in hidden but still public places; they have nowhere else to go. I have listened to the heartbroken families who have lost loved ones. If it was their choice, they would not have their loved one die alone in a filthy back lane. They would want a medically supervised facility where treatment could be given and help could be sought.

The status quo serves none of these people well. I cannot accept that this is the best we can do. It is unacceptable. We must try something different. I accept that it may not work, but we must at least try. Today is International Ask a Question Day, and my question of the UK Government is this: Glasgow has a plan that could reduce drug-related nuisance to residents, reduce harm to drug users and save lives, so will the UK Government let Glasgow get on with the job? I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Crispin Blunt, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Joanna Cherry, Ronnie Cowan, Christine Jardine, Stephen Kerr, Stuart C. McDonald, Ian Murray, Liz Saville Roberts, Mr Paul Sweeney and Dr Philippa Whitford present the Bill.

Alison Thewliss accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April, and to be printed (Bill 184).

Point of Order

3.33 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I rise to seek your guidance on what parliamentary procedure might be available to me to get a reply from the Home Office on matters relating to my constituents.

Four months ago to the day, I wrote to the then Minister of State at the Home Office asking whether he would review the resources available to the Members' support line at UK Visas and Immigration because my staff were unable to get basic information. Four months later, I have received no reply, despite several reminders. The problem remains, and I feel that this lack of support from UKVI is compromising my ability as an elected Member to represent my constituents who are in grave circumstances. I seek your direction, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to what can be done to make the Home Department respond to a Member.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he wished to raise this matter. It is obviously unsatisfactory that he has had to wait for such a long time to receive a response, but I am sure his concern has been heard on the Treasury Bench and will be conveyed to the Home Office.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands) *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Meanwhile, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) has obviously made his dissatisfaction clear, and it is now on the record.

European Affairs

[DAY 1]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the general debate on European affairs. The theme of today's debate is international trade.

3.35 pm

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): I beg to move,

That this House has considered European Affairs.

I welcome the fact that we are having this debate, which is perhaps a return to the tradition of a pre-European Council debate in the House of Commons. I used to take part in those twice-yearly debates. When I checked my last contribution, which was in June 2008, I was reminded that I, like so many other Conservative Members, called for a new approach in Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Irish rejection of the Lisbon treaty. The purpose of today's debate, however, is not to dwell on missed opportunities in the past, or to reflect on what might have been had the EU reformed itself; we are here to look to the future, and the Department for International Trade is at the very centre of that bright future.

Before I turn to the future of our trade with Europe and the negotiations under way, it is important to take stock of what we have achieved so far. The joint report issued in December sets out a financial settlement that honours commitments we undertook as EU members, just as we said we would. It agrees to avoid a hard border in Ireland, while respecting the UK's integrity, which was and is one of the Government's priorities for these negotiations. Very importantly, it safeguards the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and of UK nationals living abroad, which the Prime Minister has always said was her first priority. Some 17% of my constituents in Chelsea and Fulham are nationals of other EU countries; indeed, my wife is an EU national. I have put in a lot of time and effort in outreach to them, and I can report to the House that the December agreement landed very well among EU nationals there. Ireland, the budget and citizens' rights—these are strong foundations for the ongoing negotiations, and we should all welcome the progress that has been made on them.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I have listened very carefully to what the Minister has said. Will he acknowledge that there are still very serious concerns about what needs to happen to preserve an invisible border on the island of Ireland—one that does not have any physical infrastructure—and that there is seemingly a misunderstanding in some parts about what is actually meant by the fall-back option of full alignment?

Greg Hands: We have been absolutely clear that we will of course abide by the December agreement in full. Let me remind the hon. Lady that the three priorities we laid out include a strong commitment to avoid a hard border, but also to preserve the integrity of the UK market—I remind her that having access to the UK market is very important for the people of Northern Ireland. No UK Prime Minister could accept a new border down the Irish sea.

We are also making strong progress on our trading relationships outside the EU, which is my primary responsibility as Minister for Trade Policy.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): To follow on from that point, my right hon. Friend has repeated two points from December, and at Prime Minister's questions the Prime Minister repeated her full commitment to the December agreement on Ireland. When he says there will be no hard border, I assume that means there will be no physical infrastructure. I of course recognise that we will not have a border down the Irish sea, but does he accept that, if there is no other way of achieving it, we are going to have the full regulatory convergence to which the Government signed up in the December agreement?

Greg Hands: I reiterate that what the Prime Minister said at Mansion House and at Prime Minister's questions this week still stands. I refer my right hon. and learned Friend to the papers published last summer by the Department for Exiting the European Union on how a proper border between the two parts of Ireland can be effectuated through the two possible types of customs agreements between the UK and the European Union.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I asked the Prime Minister during her statement, and I have written to her, about paragraph 47 of the December agreement, which mentions the mapping exercise on north-south co-operation. Will the Government commit to publishing that mapping exercise?

Greg Hands: The Government are undertaking analyses of so many different factors involved in this particular arrangement and question. We have always made clear our commitment to ensuring that the House is properly apprised of all the relevant facts when it comes to examine the actual withdrawal agreement in due course.

As we prepare the ground at the Department for International Trade, its Ministers have made more than 100 overseas visits in the past year and a half. We have set up 14 trade working groups, covering 21 countries with a substantial market size. None of that would have been possible without the excellent work of our Department for International Trade staff, both at home and in post in 108 countries around the world. I put on the record my thanks for their hard work, professionalism and invaluable expertise.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): The Minister is right to pay tribute to his Department's staff. First, has he noted the comments of the Department's recent former permanent secretary to the effect that, if we are to leave the European Union, non-EU trade will not make up for the loss of trade that we currently enjoy with the EU? Secondly, the Secretary of State was part of a campaign that promised that we would start negotiating new trade agreements with other non-EU countries as soon as we voted to leave. How many of those new trade agreements are being negotiated right now?

Greg Hands: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that this is not an either/or situation: it is not a choice between having trade with the European Union or with the rest of the world. The Government's objectives are clear, namely, to secure a deep and comprehensive partnership with the European Union while still being

able—crucially, outside the customs union—to pursue an independent trade policy and to secure those agreements with the rest of the world.

On what was said during the campaign, the Department for International Trade has the capability in place and we have built up the Department. I have mentioned the 14 trade working groups. We are clearly not able to carry out a trade negotiation while we are still members of the European Union, but the hon. Gentleman seems to be demanding that we have those negotiations while at the same time saying that we should stay in the EU, which would prevent us from having the negotiations in the first place.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, given the incredible depth and complexity of the UK's trade with Europe, there is no off-the-shelf solution available from any other trade relationship? Does he also agree that, if we are to have as frictionless trade as possible, there clearly needs to be some form of agreement for what will happen at our customs, such as a partnership or another type of agreement?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is right on both counts. There is no off-the-shelf agreement that would be suitable in this case. We are clear that we are seeking a bespoke arrangement between the United Kingdom and the European Union. Neither something like the comprehensive economic and trade agreement nor something like the European economic area would be suitable. On co-operation, we are clear that we seek a good agreement with the European Union that creates as frictionless trade as possible across all our borders, not just the internal border on the island of Ireland.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): May I take the Minister back to the former permanent secretary? When Mr Donnelly was interviewed on the "Today" programme that morning, so keen were the presenters to get his soundbite about the packet of crisps that they gave no analysis whatsoever of his figures, which were about 10% awry from those issued by the national statistics office. Has the Department done any digging into where his figures came from?

Greg Hands: My right hon. Friend tempts me down a path which I think I ought to resist. I am not exactly sure what figures the former permanent secretary used, but the figures are clear: European Union trade is extremely important to this country, but it is none the less a declining part of our overall trade, down from 56% in 2006 to just 43% today.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: I am going to make a bit of progress.

We are not working purely on non-EU trade. A common misconception is that the DIT is a purely Brexit Department. Our ongoing work of encouraging investment and exports is equally important, and that applies just as much to trade with Europe as it does to trade outside it. DIT has over 300 staff across continental Europe. I myself have made 16 European visits to 10 countries while in this position, as have all our ministerial team, including the Secretary of State. We have brilliant teams in commercial centres right the way across Europe.

Anna Soubry: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. It is very good, kind and generous of him. May we just return to the comments made by Sir Martin Donnelly, because I do not think the record will be accurate? We have heard mention of a bag of crisps. What he said was that, based on his experience of 15 years and beyond in the specific area of trade, our country was in effect embarking on a course that was the equivalent of swapping a three-course meal for a bag of crisps. Has my right hon. Friend seen the Government's own analysis of the various options available to us that show that, even if we get a trade deal with every single country with which we do not have one by virtue of our membership of the European Union, which is about 50, we will still not be as prosperous as we are now by virtue of our membership of the European Union?

Greg Hands: I thank my right hon. Friend for her lengthy intervention. What I would say is that there is no such analysis of the kind she describes. What I am clear on is that it is our objective to maintain frictionless trade with the European Union as we go forward. It is our objective to conduct an independent trade policy and to seek, when the time is right, trade agreements with those partners. It is also our objective to seek the continuity in existing EU trade agreements for the UK, which I note the Labour party voted against on Second Reading of the Trade Bill. Labour is actually opposed to us seeking the continuity of existing trade agreements.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Going back to the analysis published by the Government and the risk presented by non-tariff barriers, it was clear in that analysis that, even if we had an EEA-style agreement, there would still be damage to the UK economy. Is the Minister saying that he wants EEA-plus?

Greg Hands: I think I understand my hon. Friend's intervention, but the Government have been clear for more than a year, since the Lancaster House speech, that our objective is not to seek an EEA-style agreement. Nor is it our objective to seek a CETA-style agreement. It is our objective to seek a deep and comprehensive agreement with the European Union, the like of which, I remind my hon. Friend, who I know studies these matters very carefully, was not modelled in those analyses. That is the most important point.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab) *rose*—

Greg Hands: I am going to make a bit of progress.

I am going to give a few examples of our work around Europe. I promoted the UK's defence industry in Sweden, visiting Saab, whose new generation Gripen fighter jet could be worth £1.1 billion to UK industry. I and my colleagues engaged with the Polish Government directly on behalf of UK companies to discuss high-value retail opportunities in the Czech Republic—in Czech, I might add, Madam Deputy Speaker. I and my colleagues from DIT and the Department for Exiting the European Union have addressed chambers of commerce right the way across the European Union—in Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria, among many others. I enjoyed making use of my language skills when I gave speeches in German to senior business leaders in Munich, Düsseldorf, Osnabrück, Tegernsee and so on.

[Greg Hands]

DIT's relationship with Europe does not just extend to export and investment promotion. The vote to leave the EU was not a vote to undermine the EU. It is very important to understand that it is in this country's interest to have a strong and effective EU. We continue to engage constructively in ongoing EU trade policy, as we currently are a full and equal member of the EU. As the House heard on Monday, we are working closely with our European partners as well as bilaterally to respond to President Trump's decision to impose tariffs on imported steel and aluminium.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: I will make a bit more progress. We are committed to ratifying the CETA agreement with Canada, which provisionally came into effect in September. I was delighted that we were joined by 86 Labour MPs—many of whom are in the Chamber at the moment—who, in defiance of their Front-Bench team, supported the EU's trade agenda in making sure that CETA was passed. In defiance of the party Whip, they voted for that important agreement with Justin Trudeau's Canada.

We are supportive of the EU's work to sign third-country trade agreements in future, and I have attended four Trade Ministers' Foreign Affairs Councils, which included discussion of these. The Commission has been particularly focusing on agreements with South America's Mercosur union and with Mexico. We continue to support the ongoing negotiations for both free trade agreements. On Mexico, we would like to see progress made wherever possible in the negotiations, although we recognise the complexity of North American Free Trade Agreement renegotiations running in parallel. We will continue our support for EU-Mercosur trade negotiations and would like to emphasise the urgent need to progress the trade components. It is essential to keep momentum and to achieve a swift political agreement.

Another high-profile agreement is the EU-Japan economic partnership agreement, which the Commission is strongly pushing to fast-track, so that it can be signed during Japan's Prime Minister Abe's visit to Brussels in July 2018. As a champion of free trade, the UK has been one of the strongest advocates—actually, I believe the strongest advocate—of this EPA, and we warmly welcome the work of both sides to reach this agreement, which will support global prosperity. We continue to engage constructively on EU business and with our European partners, and we continue to push UK trade and investment to businesses on the European continent. It is important that our trade engagement includes Europe, because our trade with Europe—our nearest and largest neighbour—will always be of great importance.

I often hear the criticism that trade deals outside the EU cannot make up for a loss in EU trade—that has already been referred to in a couple of interventions—but, as I say, this is not an either/or choice. I can assure the House that the Government fully understand the importance of European trade. The EU is our largest trading partner, accounting for 43% of our exports and 54% of our imports. Complex and integrated supply chains across the UK and EU show the importance of making cross-border trade as free and frictionless as possible, and that is why it is important that we get our relationship with Europe right.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): On frictionless trade, will the future be better than what we have now or worse?

Greg Hands: As I said, we are seeking a good, comprehensive, deep and wide trade partnership with the EU that is as frictionless as possible. That is why the right relationship is this deep, comprehensive and unique free trade agreement with Europe, based on the principles the Prime Minister set out throughout 2017 and in her speech a fortnight ago. We should oppose Labour's latest Brexit policy of apparently keeping the UK in the, a, or perhaps any customs union with the EU. We want the greatest possible tariff and barrier-free trade with our European neighbours, as well as to negotiate our own trade agreements around the world.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): In the pursuit of this future relationship, will the Minister update the House on what progress has been made on the continuity of trading terms for our food and drink producers, especially in relation to the protected designation of origin and protected geographical indication schemes? Last week, the Secretary of State for Scotland guaranteed that there would be absolutely no change, but yesterday the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said that absolutely nothing could be guaranteed. Who is correct?

Greg Hands: It is a bit rich for the right hon. Gentleman to vote against the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and then to call for something that would be a consequence of that Bill: creating a new geographical indication scheme—by the way, we will be doing that in consultation with the devolved Administrations—to make sure that we continue to protect the UK's 84 registered GIs within the UK. That is the Government's objective, which I would hope he would support.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: No, I will make a little more progress.

We have heard questions about why we would want a bespoke trade agreement rather than taking one off the shelf, which, the argument goes, would involve easier negotiation. I remind the House of the Government's reasons for choosing this approach over existing models, such as the EEA or CETA, and why whatever model we choose must involve leaving the customs union. A Norway-style deal might seem superficially attractive, but we would be subject to any new rules that the Commission chose to enact, automatically and in their entirety, with no endpoint. Most importantly, we would have little influence over those rules and no vote, which would be too much of a loss of democratic control, and also no guarantee—far from it—that whatever the EU27 did would also be in the interests of UK businesses and consumers.

Nor should we look to a Canadian-style agreement for the answer. Even if it were easier to achieve a CETA-style deal, we start from a unique position of regulatory alignment with the EU. Unlike other countries, we start from the position that our systems are already the same. It is precisely because the Government recognise how important EU trade is that we must look to an ambitious deal, rather than starting our relationship from scratch with something like CETA.

As important as trade with the EU is, however, we must also look outside Europe. The IMF—this statistic is also on the Commission's website—estimates that over the next decade or so, 90% of global growth will come from beyond the EU. China adds an economy the size of Switzerland every year. There will be over 1 billion middle-class African consumers in 2060, and Commonwealth GDP is predicted to hit \$13 trillion in two years. These represent unprecedented opportunities, yet they are harder to reach from behind the EU's customs wall. Only once we can sign our own independent trade deals can we take full advantage of them.

Signing those deals means being outside the customs union. We need look only to Turkey to see that being in the customs union, in whole or in part, can sometimes be the worst of all worlds.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Greg Hands: I want to make progress—it is very important that Members understand the point that I am making.

The EU is currently negotiating a deal with Japan. If it finalises that deal, of which, as I say, we are strongly supportive, Turkey will need to reduce tariffs on Japanese imports, but it will not get reciprocal access to the Japanese market. It will have to negotiate its own access, but those negotiations will be more difficult because Turkey will already have reduced its own tariffs and therefore will not have as much to give in return. As the Prime Minister has set out repeatedly, we are looking for a bespoke agreement. For goods, this will be based on a comprehensive system of mutual recognition, so that products need be approved only once. On services, we have an opportunity to establish a broader agreement than ever before.

Anna Soubry: My right hon. Friend is being very kind and generous in giving way, especially as I am really not helping him. With the greatest respect, he knows, as everyone else does, that we will and can achieve all these deals with countries such as China as a member of the EU. By way of example, I have met the Australian ambassador, and while he would of course want to do a trade deal with our great country, Australia will look first to do a trade deal with the EU, with its 500 million customers. Is it not important that we make all these things very clear to the British people? We do trade deals at the moment by virtue of our membership of the EU, and the only reason why we are leaving the customs union is to chase unicorn deals, but we can get deals with the EU.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It was quite in order for the Minister to give way to the right hon. Lady, but she knows that her intervention was too long, because she said so the last time—I heard her.

Greg Hands: It was a long intervention, Madam Deputy Speaker.

With all due respect to my right hon. Friend—she and I served alongside each other in government—the British people have made the decision to leave the European Union. That was the crucial decision made in June 2016. The Government's purpose is now to ensure that we have the best possible frictionless trade deal with the European Union, while still being able to take

advantage of trade opportunities beyond the EU. As I have stated repeatedly during this debate, that is the Government's objective.

Stewart Hosie: Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: No. I have already used up 25 minutes, and I am going to make a little more progress.

On services, we have the opportunity to establish a broader agreement than ever before. Of course we recognise that we cannot have the rights of single market membership, such as passporting for financial services, just as we understand that we cannot have all the benefits of single market membership without the obligations, but that does not mean that we should be shackled by existing precedent.

I know that some Members will ask how we can be sure that the EU will agree to our approach. The main point to bear in mind is that it is strongly in EU countries' interests—economic and otherwise—to sign and agree such a deal. On the day we leave, the United Kingdom will overnight become the EU's second largest trading partner—larger than China, Japan or India. The Commission estimates trade between the UK and the EU27 to be worth €812 billion. That is only 8% behind the EU27's main trading partner, the United States, but it is 60% more than with China, which comes third.

Given the effort that the EU has put into deals with the likes of Mexico, Vietnam and Singapore—all of which, crucially, we support, but each of which is significantly less important to the EU than ours—it would be odd indeed for it to reject proposals from us. Furthermore, both the EU and the UK need to send a loud and clear message that we are strong believers in free trade. What message would be sent if we could not reach a free trade agreement?

However, even that underestimates our importance to the EU, because it is the type of trade that matters, not just the volume. Our strongest comparative advantages are in the business, professional and financial services that other businesses need to grow, and in the pharmaceutical goods that no one wants to exclude. For an advanced economy, good financial infrastructure is just as important as physical infrastructure, even if it is not as obvious. Restricting Europe's access to the City's financial infrastructure would be the act of a latter-day Beeching—although this time the main line would be closed, not the branch. Yes, the rest of the network could try and pick up the slack—the Frankfurts or Parisés—but as I know, because I have worked in the sector, that network has less capacity and is less efficient, and EU businesses and manufacturers could not connect with the capital market that they need. The EU talks about a capital markets union, but how tenable is that without access to Europe's main capital market?

Our relationship goes beyond mutual economic interest, however. Our membership of the EU is only one part of our relationship with Europe. We can still be neighbours when we leave: we are 30 km from the coast of France. We have cultural ties from before the EU was founded. We will still be in the same core organisations that the EU or its members are part of, from the European Court of Human Rights to the UN to NATO, and from the International Monetary Fund to the World Trade Organisation—the economic, security and humanitarian firmament that holds the international system together.

Vicky Ford: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Greg Hands: No. I am about to finish.

Nevertheless, the Department for International Trade is preparing this country for life outside the EU. We are proceeding with trade and customs Bills that will give us a functioning customs regime on day one. As one would expect, they have been designed to prepare us for every eventuality, although they will be needed regardless of the outcome of our negotiations with the EU. They will give us a strong trade remedies regime. Free trade does not mean trade without rules, but Labour opposed these new powers when they were considered on Second Reading. Our independent trade remedies regime will allow us to protect UK industry from unfair dumping or subsidy, while balancing its interests against the interests of UK consumers and other UK businesses. It will be delivered through an independent trade remedies authority, so that businesses have the confidence they need that it will be impartial and will not act against the interests of wider industry. I want to make sure that this new regime works as well for business as it should from the start. We are consulting on which existing EU trade remedies we should carry over, and I encourage any business with an interest to respond before the consultation closes at the end of this month, and any Members with producer or consumer interests to help to publicise this.

The Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill will also allow us to create a UK unilateral trade preferences regime for developing countries. Shockingly, this was also opposed by Labour, the Scottish National party and the Liberal Democrats on Second Reading. The UK is a proud advocate of supporting developing countries to reduce poverty through trade, and I hope that Labour will reconsider its stance. This Bill will let us continue the UK's existing system of preferential access for developing countries, which reduces or removes import tariffs from a number of countries, while also allowing us to explore improvements on the EU's current system.

Leaving the European Union will allow us to negotiate trade deals across the world, but at the same time, this Government understand the importance of EU trade. That is why we seek a deep and special partnership with the EU. This is the only appropriate option. Members of all parties should be optimistic that that can be achieved.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the Opposition spokesman, let me say that while it is clear that a great many Members wish to speak, we have limited time, so there will be an initial time limit of eight minutes on Back-Bench speeches, which is likely to reduce. I make this announcement so that Members can tailor their speeches accordingly.

4.6 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It was a year ago yesterday that this House voted overwhelmingly to give the Prime Minister the authority to trigger article 50. It is almost a year since she did so and nearly 20 months since the referendum result that set that process in train. The Government accepted the EU timetable, and while the cut-off point might ultimately slip by a week or even two, the draft withdrawal agreement, including the framework for the future relationship, will have to be wrapped up in just seven months' time.

We welcome the joint report published in December last year and the progress it represented, but the fact remains that the Government are running out of time and of road, so, frankly, it is extraordinary that, despite the scale of the legislative task confronting us between now and exit day, the Government have decided that the best use of our time is two days of general debate on European affairs without even the possibility of a vote.

While we welcome any and every chance to debate Brexit and Europe, this is a farcical situation. No date has been set for the Report stage of either the Customs Bill or the trade Bill, as the Government rightly fear a possible defeat. The immigration Bill we are now told will hopefully be with us before Christmas, a year after it was initially expected, but as the Home Secretary has made clear, it might not even be law by the day we leave. And there is absolutely no sign of the fisheries or agriculture Bills, or, for that matter, anything that could reasonably be described as a domestic legislative agenda. As Philip Cowley, professor of politics at Queen Mary University of London has said:

"This is an approach to parliamentary democracy known to procedural experts as: Run Away."

The reason for this legislative paralysis is obvious: the Conservative party remains bitterly divided over how to implement Brexit and what the future relationship with the EU27 should be.

Anna Soubry: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me, and I am going to be honest about all this: that there is some division on these Benches, but, equally, there is division still on the hon. Gentleman's Benches? While the move to a customs union has been welcomed, does he anticipate that we might see more movement to the customs union and of course to accepting that the single market would also be a good way to settle it?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention. We do need to be honest about this. An issue of this magnitude and importance is bound to create different views in all parties, but I would argue that the divisions on the Labour Benches are nothing like the fundamental divisions in the Cabinet and on the Government Benches. Certainly, the divisions on our side are not preventing legislation from being brought forward for us to vote on.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I just want to make a bit of progress, if that is okay.

The Prime Minister's Mansion House speech on 2 March was as much an attempt to muffle those divisions as it was to provide clarity on the Government's vision of the end-state relationship. To be fair, it was a more serious and detailed speech than those that had gone before, and it was pleasingly devoid of empty sloganeering. There was no repeat of earlier banalities such as "Brexit means Brexit" or "a red, white and blue Brexit". At last, we heard a speech that started to engage with many of the hard truths about our departure from the EU. It stressed the need for compromise on all sides and conceded that inevitable trade-offs would have to be made if we were to avoid the hardest and most damaging of departures. As with her Florence speech in September last year, one wished that that content could have been

delivered far earlier in the process. Had it been, I suspect that the country would have been in a better position today.

Judging by the raft of tortuous cherry and cake metaphors that we heard from the Government Benches in response to the Prime Minister's statement on Monday, she might have succeeded in her immediate objective of holding together her deeply divided Government and party and in giving herself a small degree of room to manoeuvre in the months ahead. However, it is patently obvious that those divisions remain as deep as ever. That is blindingly obvious. If they had been healed, we would now be considering the Report stage of the Customs Bill or the trade Bill, rather than having a general debate such as this. Make no mistake, those divisions will have to be confronted, and the sensible majority in this House will have to be given the opportunity to shape the Brexit process sooner rather than later, not least because, although the Prime Minister's speech was more realistic in important ways, it was still not realistic enough.

Emma Reynolds: One of the things that the Prime Minister said in her speech was that we will inevitably have less access as a result of the hard Brexit that the Government are pursuing. Does my hon. Friend agree that less access to our biggest market will mean fewer jobs, less investment and less economic growth?

Matthew Pennycook: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I could not have put it better myself.

The theme of today's debate is international trade. The sections relating to customs were arguably the least convincing parts of the Prime Minister's speech. In contrast to other areas, there was no attempt to engage with the hard truths about what leaving the customs union will mean for the UK, and particularly with the impact of that decision on manufacturing and the Irish border. As the House knows, the Prime Minister simply went back to the two propositions that the Government set out in their future partnership paper published on 15 August last year. They were a

"customs partnership between the UK and the EU"

or

"a highly streamlined customs arrangement, where we"—

that is, the UK—

"would jointly agree to implement a range of measures to minimise frictions to trade, together with specific provisions for Northern Ireland."

The first proposition is untried and untested. By the Government's own admission, it would take at least five years to implement and it would be ripe for abuse. It was roundly rejected by the EU last year, not least because it would require EU member states to completely reconfigure their own national customs systems. The idea is not simply "blue sky thinking", as the Secretary of State described it in September last year; it is pie-in-the-sky thinking.

The second option would, according to the chief executive of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, take three years to put in place and would result in friction on our borders. It would therefore require a range of measures, including unproven "technology-based solutions", to minimise frictions to trade. In her speech, the Prime Minister claimed that both those options were serious

and merited consideration, but they were widely rubbished in the wake of that speech. The EU immediately ruled them out as non-starters.

The truth is that the Government have absolutely no idea about what to do about the issue of customs and the Irish border. The fall-back that surfaced in the EU Commission draft legal text published on 28 February—namely, that Northern Ireland should go into a customs union with the south and that the UK border should be shifted to somewhere in the Irish sea—is clearly unacceptable. The Prime Minister quite rightly made it clear that no UK Prime Minister could accept such an outcome. The Irish border issue remains unresolved.

One part of a wider solution to the border issue would be, as the Opposition have suggested, to negotiate a new comprehensive UK-EU customs union. Such a customs union would ensure that goods covered by the agreement could still be traded with the EU tariff free, with no new customs or rules of origin checks. The exact terms of such a customs union would, of course, have to be negotiated, but this represents a pragmatic proposal, reflecting current arrangements, and it has been welcomed by trade unions and by business, including the Manufacturers Organisation—formerly the EEF—and the CBI. It would be a win-win for both the UK and the EU27. A new UK-EU customs union would not prevent the UK from trading globally or improving our export industry, just as the EU customs union has not stopped Germany making China its largest trading partner, for example. Germany now exports four times more to China than the UK. The UK would still be free, as we are now, to negotiate in the areas of services, data, investment, procurement and intellectual property, and UK businesses would still be able to export to non-EU markets just as other EU countries do. In short, there is no question but that the UK could and would still increase trade inside a customs union with the EU, as the Secretary of State for International Trade said earlier this year in relation to the Prime Minister's visit to China.

A new, comprehensive UK-EU customs union, were it agreed, would of course require the UK to adopt a common external tariff with the EU, and we would of course seek both to replicate existing EU trade agreements and benefit from negotiated future deals. It is true that we would not be able to negotiate independent third-party trade deals, but as many hon. Members have already mentioned, we need to face up to some hard facts in this area, because the notion that future free trade agreements will offset the inevitable economic costs of exiting a customs union with the EU is nonsense. To say, as the Minister did, that it is simply not an either/or question does not get to the heart of the issue that confronts us.

Vicky Ford: When the hon. Gentleman says that he wants to stay in a customs union with the EU, will he confirm that he will continue to comply with EU state aid and competition law as a condition of staying in that customs union? I cannot find a single example of a country that can stay in the customs union while disregarding state aid laws.

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Lady has great expertise in this area, but I think she has slightly misjudged the fact, as I understand it, that that is not about customs, but about the elements that make up the single market. We have said that we would seek, in principle, to negotiate

[*Matthew Pennycook*]

protections, clarifications or exemptions where necessary, but I cannot imagine a situation in which those exemptions would be necessary. As I think the Leader of the Opposition said on “Peston on Sunday” some time ago, there is nothing in the current state aid rules that would prevent us from implementing, for example, our manifesto.

Many hon. Members have already mentioned this, but Sir Martin Donnelly, the former permanent secretary at the Department for International Trade, said that the reality is that what the Government are proposing is akin to giving up

“a three-course meal... for the promise of a packet of crisps in the future”.

The EU currently constitutes 44% of our exports and 53% of our imports. It must be our priority. Increases in trade from new free trade agreements with the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand combined would be worth less than 3% of our current trade in goods and services.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I will make a bit of progress.

FTAs with the BRIC countries would be worth just over 2%. Any such trade deals, even if they could be secured reasonably quickly, would in all likelihood also involve detrimental trade-offs and compromises in standards and regulations with which the British public would rightly take issue.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): On that point about regulation, the Government’s leaked cross-Whitehall EU exit analysis paper outlines the regulatory opportunities of Brexit and states:

“A cross-Whitehall work-stream is working through these opportunities.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that that is code for deregulation and the ripping up of our workplace environment rights? The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is already unable to give us any clarification about the European Environment Agency. Is this not just a bonfire of our rights?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend. That is certainly the fear. I read the same analysis as he did—I had to surrender my phone to do so and then found that it had been released publicly a week later—and it does say in several places that there are opportunities to deregulate. Perhaps the Minister can tell us why those things are being modelled and to what they might refer.

One has only to listen to the noises coming from the United States Government on issues ranging from the replacement of the EU-US open skies treaty to the inclusion of agriculture in any FTA to get a sense of how difficult things will be even when it comes to new deals with some of our closest allies, and that is irrespective of who occupies the White House. The prospect of new free trade agreements might give the International Trade Secretary a purpose, but they would be good for little else.

Mark Garnier: I want to go back to the comments that the hon. Gentleman made about Sir Martin Donnelly, whom I worked with for a number of months; he is a

civil servant of extreme ability and wisdom. When he made the banquet versus the packet of crisps analogy, I think he was looking to a certain extent at some of those simple gravity models used by the Treasury—the simple mathematical trade-off between tariffs with the EU and tariffs elsewhere.

What is missed in all this debate is the ability of the UK to find itself at the centre of a network of trade deals. For example, a US manufacturer might see the advantage in moving its manufacturing operations to the UK to take advantage of a UK-India trade deal, for example, if the trade relationship between the UK and India was greater and better than that between America and India directly. That is the unknown that we are struggling to analyse, to get the true comparison between one type of relationship and the other.

Matthew Pennycook: I simply do not think that that stacks up. I listened to Sir Martin’s comments very carefully, and I am not sure that he was referring to that. However, if the hon. Gentleman makes a speech, I will be personally interested in hearing his points.

Emma Reynolds: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I am going to make progress, as lots of people want to speak.

A sensible, pragmatic Government focused on the economic interests of the country would adjust their policy accordingly and consider the option of a new, comprehensive customs union along the lines that Labour has suggested. Importantly, so would any Government committed, as this Government are under the terms of the phase 1 agreement, to the avoidance of a hard border on the island of Ireland, including any physical infrastructure or related checks and controls—a border that is frictionless, not as frictionless as possible. Let us be clear: a border that has checks, even “very, very minimal” checks, as the Foreign Secretary suggested to a business audience last week, is still a border that would require some kind of infrastructure and patrols.

A version of the Canada-US border, which the Prime Minister suggested was being explored, is simply not good enough. The threat that such an outcome would pose to the politics, security and economy of the island of Ireland, as well as to the daily lives of citizens on both sides of the border, are obvious to most hon. Members.

We recognise that a new, comprehensive customs union, in itself, is not a complete solution to the Irish border issue. To obviate the need for physical infrastructure on and checks at that border and to uphold the Good Friday agreement in its entirety, in all three strands, full regulatory alignment in relation to all goods production and trade would be required. That alignment would, of course, have to be maintained over time as EU legislation evolved.

That is one of the reasons why we need to secure a new agreement that gives us the closest possible relationship with the single market: full access to European markets; no new impediments to trade; no drop in the rights, standards and protections built up over our 43 years as an EU member state; and no prospect of falling behind them in the future. We must recognise that our future economic relationship depends on maintaining a level playing field and the same standards that business wants.

But when it comes to goods, a conversation with the EU27 about full regulatory alignment, and the institutional mechanisms that might be required to facilitate such alignment, is not even possible when the Government have ruled out membership of a customs union. The idea that

“a comprehensive system of mutual recognition”

is an alternative solution—something that EU member states do not even expect of each other—is mistaken. There is no solution to the Irish border issue that does not involve some form of customs union. That is why the Government must reconsider their red line in this area. If they do not, it will be difficult to see what their solution to the Irish border issue—or, indeed, the issue of a customs border at Dover—might be. That matters because, although the Government may be able to fudge some of the difficult decisions for now, the issue of the Irish border issue can no longer be fudged.

Caroline Lucas: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I am just coming to a close.

The draft withdrawal agreement merely needs to include a political declaration on the future relationship—that is, its broad outlines—with the details to be hammered out after the UK has left the EU.

Vicky Ford *rose—*

Matthew Pennycook: I will not give way.

But the Irish border issue is an integral part of the withdrawal agreement. Without a solution to it, it is very difficult to imagine how the Government secure an orderly exit deal or a transition period, let alone a post-Brexit trade deal.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We now have a time limit of eight minutes.

4.24 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I am pleased to speak in today's general debate and talk a little about my views as we move towards phase 3, with a specific focus on the pensions, asset management and long-term savings industries and our future trade in those services.

Some 24% of people employed in the UK in the general insurance, life assurance and pensions sector work in Scotland—many in my constituency of East Renfrewshire, due to its access to the Glasgow financial district and the central belt as a whole, as well as the easy links down to London. These industries want a deal. Why? It is because no deal means that banks, insurance companies and fund managers could not provide services across the UK from the EU. Contracts, particularly for derivatives, which run over exit day could simply become unenforceable. Business liability insurance contracts often stretch decades ahead. Insurers could, as a result of a no-deal Brexit, lose their licence to do insurance in the customer's jurisdiction. Cross-border pension payments from the UK into the EU and vice versa simply could not be paid. It would defy common sense not to have a Brexit deal on financial services, given that the insurance and long-term savings sectors are so largely aligned and integrated, and our trade in services is vital to both parties.

The UK's asset management industry is the second largest in the world, managing nearly £7 trillion-worth of assets, serving a global client base. Similarly, numerous investment funds used by pension providers are set up under Irish law or other EU-based jurisdictions. More than 150 UK managers are managing Irish funds right now, with more than 2,000 Irish-domiciled funds sold in the UK. That is more than €600 billion in fund assets managed by UK managers in Ireland on behalf of UK investors.

The Association of British Insurers said last summer that a no-deal Brexit is “unacceptable”. The Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association was even more blunt when it said:

“WTO-only would cause major disruption. On no account could the pension fund industry support a regime based only on WTO rules. This would be likely to cause economic harm, create regulatory barriers and undermine essential pensions support services.”

That was why the industry welcomed the Mansion House speech. Clarification and honesty of the reality of what we are confronting allows people to move forward. If we leave the single market, passporting, which is a central pillar of the EU financial services regime, will end. Currently, there are 336,421 passports held by UK firms, and many firms hold multiple passports for multiple member states. The London Market Group recently published figures suggesting that the UK insurance sector takes in £14 billion a year of business connected with the EU.

That clarity was needed. Now we need to start talking about successor arrangements, with the transitional period being a time for firms to adapt to changes in the marketplace and regulatory structures. A primary risk for institutions that access EU markets from the UK is the post-Brexit loss of that access on a short-term or longer-term basis, because no equivalence decision has been issued in time. A lack of agreement on equivalence would also affect elements of financial services infrastructure, such as access to clearing houses or payment services, or the provision of custody services to certain clients.

Bottoming out that equivalence process for the UK as a third country must be a priority. If we want to maintain and enhance this country's position as the leading global financial centre, we will need to be regulated in accordance with the highest global standards. That is important for not just UK firms, but third-country institutions, such as those based in the US or Hong Kong, which cannot make use of the passporting system and must establish an authorised presence in an EU member state. For this reason, many third-country institutions have chosen to base themselves in London through a UK subsidiary as their primary point of access to EU markets through passporting, and we want them to be able to continue to do so.

We also need to agree successor arrangements for passporting of deposit taking and lending business under the capital requirements directive and the alternative investment fund managers directive. Third-country recognition is absolutely vital, and the process for that needs to have been sorted out long before we have left. UCITS—undertakings for the collective investment of transferable securities—are required to have their management companies established in an EU member state, so a bespoke mutual recognition agreement that would allow UK entities to continue fulfil their UCITS roles will be necessary.

[Paul Masterton]

Pension schemes are subject to EU legislation, both as institutional investors affected by EU financial market regulation, such as MiFID II—the markets in financial instruments directive—and the European market infrastructure regulation on the derivatives market, and, significantly, directly under the directive on institutions for occupational retirement provision, on workplace pension schemes. IORP II is due to be implemented in the UK by January 2019.

During the negotiation of IORP II, the UK was successful in warding off the threat of an EU solvency regime for pensions, which could have resulted in a bill for British business of up to €650 billion. This remains on the agenda of EIOPA—the European Insurance and Occupational Pensions Authority—which is the EU-level pensions regulatory body. Everyone knows I would like the maximum possible access to the single market, but it is essential that any future moves by the EU to propose a new EU solvency regime should not apply to defined-benefit schemes in the UK. The absolute worst case scenario for UK pension schemes would be to find themselves more vulnerable outside the EU to the damaging regulation that was successfully blocked when the UK was inside the EU.

More broadly, a good trade deal is vital to the pensions industry because of the significance to employers that sponsor pension schemes across the manufacturing sector. A bad Brexit will have huge detrimental economic impacts on those sectors, which would put huge pressure on those employers' ability to fund their schemes. Pension schemes need full access to the global financial markets, both for investments that will give them the resources to meet their pension commitments and for de-risking and hedging purposes so that they can manage their risks. We need the UK financial services industry to remain as strong and vibrant as it is today.

I have spoken in two Westminster Hall debates recently: one on the European Free Trade Association and one on alternatives to a no-deal Brexit. I shall not repeat what I said there, but I remain of the view that EFTA-EEA membership finds a neat balance by reflecting that the EU referendum result, although decisive, was not overwhelming. Is it a perfect option? No. I want that bespoke deal and believe and trust in the Prime Minister to bring back the best terms possible, but if we need a plan B, for whatever reason, it cannot be to crash out on World Trade Organisation rules. The Prime Minister should have the maximum flexibility she needs to do the right deal and should not be hemmed in by individuals and groups from either side of the Chamber.

Back in East Renfrewshire, are people dancing down the streets of Barrhead and Clarkston at the thought of Britain leaving the EU? No. But they are not drawing down the blinds and taking to their beds, either. What they want, and what they need, are practical, workable solutions to be put forward in the national interest, pragmatism over ideology, and optimism that is merited but grounded in reality. That is why the Prime Minister's Mansion House speech was so welcome. This is a negotiation, but I hope that the EU will engage with the suggestions constructively and that we will be able, at long last, to move forward at pace.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I am glad that the House is much better behaved today than it was yesterday, because we are being observed this afternoon by our colleagues and friends from the Parliament of Afghanistan, whom I am delighted to welcome to Westminster. I hope that they will find our deliberations on Europe enlightening.

4.31 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I add the Scottish National party's welcome to our colleagues and friends from Afghanistan.

Here we are with yet another European Union debate. I was elected almost three years ago. After I was appointed Europe spokesperson, the European Union Referendum Bill was introduced. Europe has dominated my time here, but that is because it is important. Almost three years on, I think it is fairly safe to say that things are not going terribly well for the Government.

The EU has brought us a huge number of benefits. I am somebody who has enjoyed some of those benefits through education, which we can access regardless of our backgrounds and our financial means, and through freedom of movement, from which not only do we benefit, because we can work and live throughout the EU, but our economy benefits, because of the people coming to the United Kingdom to live and work.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) was right in the preceding speech to highlight some of the difficulties faced by financial services in his constituency. In my constituency, I am regularly approached about issues on which we still do not have an answer, such as seasonal workers and the food and drink industry, which relies so heavily on seasonal workers and freedom of movement. We have had no clear answers from the Government.

All that is important right now, because some farmers have told me about a decline in the numbers of seasonal workers. What does that mean for crops that are planted in advance for the following years, many of which need to be taken in by hand? Business decisions for after we have left the EU need to be made now. There is precious little certainty and precious little decision making going on about what is going to happen after 29 March next year and, crucially, in the harvest period after that. The tourist sector also relies heavily on seasonal workers and freedom of movement.

I have just mentioned some of the benefits that EU membership brings to students. We must also reflect on the fact that our centres of education and research rely on the excellence that comes from their being able to tap into a pool of talent and the benefits of freedom of movement, as well as the benefits that are brought by Horizon 2020 and the other programmes that are so important.

The biggest employer in my constituency is the University of St Andrews, and a great deal of people who live locally work at the University of Dundee and Abertay University, and even at the University of Aberdeen and the University of Edinburgh. Education and research is a big industry and a big employer. Not only are those jobs important and not only are these learning establishments at which our young people and mature people can grow and increase their skills, thereby improving our economy, but the industry will benefit us in the years to come as we get those breakthroughs on things like dementia, dyslexia and helping kids to have a better

educational experience through some of the research that has been done by EU nationals and through Horizon 2020.

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Gentleman is making a compelling speech. Does he agree that it is extraordinary to see a Government so proudly leading the country into a situation in which we will all be so much poorer, not just economically but in the terms he describes—the richness of our relationships with other EU countries in our research establishments and elsewhere, which are so important? It is young people whose futures are being closed down in a most unforgivable way.

Stephen Gethins: As usual, the hon. Lady makes an excellent and powerful point, and Government Members would do well to listen to her—in fact, the hon. Members beside her might do well to do so too sometimes. I will come on to the finances that she rightly raises, but before I do I want to talk about the broader impact on public services in areas such as access to the single market, which is so important in decreasing red tape. We often hear about red tape, but access to the single market has reduced red tape, not least for our SMEs. I have mentioned seasonal workers, but we must also think about the impact on services and on our doctors, nurses and dentists who enjoy freedom of movement and come from throughout the European Union. It can be difficult to get a dentist and my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) often mentions the practice in his constituency that is made up of several EU nationals.

The single market makes us more competitive. I just mentioned the benefits of Horizon 2020, and the European Medicines Agency is also important—it is based in London, but it is due to be taken away, taking jobs with it.

Another issue is cash for public services, as the hon. Lady just mentioned. The UK Government talk about finding common ground between themselves and the Scottish Government. There is one area of common ground between them—the Minister is right to look up at that point. They agree in their analysis that leaving the EU will be devastating for the economies of both Scotland and the United Kingdom. The Scottish Government's figures—we were told that they were not right until the UK Government's figures suddenly came out and agreed with them—showed that the hit on our GDP will be devastating in every single scenario set out. Every 1% reduction in GDP could hit tax by £8 billion, but that does not even start to address the amount of money that we will have to shell out just to leave the European Union, reported to be £40 billion. The Chancellor is preparing to leave with initial costs—initial—of £3 billion. The *Financial Times* estimates that Brexit has already cost the UK economy £18 billion, or about £350 million a week. I am not sure where we have heard that figure before.

If we have lower GDP and less money from the tax take, we will have less money to spend on public services—that is a basic fact. In Scotland, the Scottish Government have made changes in tax so that the majority are no worse off or better off, but that will raise an additional £164 million. That is welcome, but it is only a drop in the ocean of the money that we will need to try to save our public services from the hits that will come their way. If anyone could tell me how they will plug the gap

in public services that will be caused, I would be delighted to hear from them. Would anybody like to make an intervention? I did not think so. Nobody has a clue—

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): The whole premise of what the hon. Gentleman is saying is based on figures that do not take into account at all of what the Prime Minister has set out to achieve, which is a special and deep partnership with the European Union. The figures that he quotes are the same figures that Scottish National party Members campaigned on during the referendum, when they predicted that there would be a recession and that the economy would fall off a cliff. They were false prophets then and they are false prophets now.

Stephen Gethins: I salute the hon. Gentleman's courage in bringing that up, but I am actually using his own Government's figures.

Christian Matheson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Antoinette Sandbach: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: I would like to make a little bit of progress, but I will come to the hon. Members in just a moment.

I am using this Government's figures. We need to have a real and proper debate about how we plug the gaps in tax and in GDP.

Christian Matheson: The hon. Gentleman has obviously gone through a methodical process of working out the effect of Brexit on GDP. Has he worked out the effect on GDP of an empty Tory slogan?

Stephen Gethins: Well, we have worked out the impact on the NHS and on education, and that will be devastating to our public services because of the empty promises that each and every one of us will pay for.

Stewart Hosie: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stephen Gethins: I will just make a little bit of progress.

I say gently to Government Members that there are serious issues around tax raised and GDP that we must all wrestle with in a serious manner, offering some suggestions, but right now the Government are not handling some of the big issues of the day. Time that is being taken up with this issue is strangling political debate. The strikes in our universities right now are crucial for all parties and we should all take them seriously; yet, as we look to a fair solution, this matter cannot be a priority because this Government are so consumed by Brexit and what is going on with leaving the European Union that other issues simply get ignored. Brexit strangles that proper and serious debate.

Antoinette Sandbach: I do not want the impression to be given to this House that the recent figures published by the Exiting the European Union Committee were the same as the figures that were used pre-referendum. Two totally different economic models were used. It would be wrong for the record of this House to suggest that the figures used before the referendum were the same as the ones after.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I note the differences that I sometimes have with her, but she makes an honest point. I note the correction to those Members on her Benches who have been avoiding the figures from their own Government.

I welcome the remarks of the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) on the customs union, and I hope that he will go to the next step on the single market. I particularly note and am grateful for his remarks on Northern Ireland, because Northern Ireland is one area that has been overlooked. The danger to the peace process is not something that any of us should take lightly, regardless of the views of different Members across this House. We have to take it seriously.

I know that my hon. Friends will talk about the continuity Bill in Holyrood, where we find the Conservatives utterly isolated in their latest power grab. When challenged, they say that we have to choose between the UK and the EU. That is nonsense and highlights the utter isolationism that sits at the hearts of many—not all—Government Members who reach out for this “ourselves alone” approach.

We need to start looking at where we can make progress. I have seen one silver lining in this House, for which I pay credit to Members from across the parties. I am seeing—from my short experience, I will admit—Members from across the House seeking to work together better than they have done before. It is not always easy, but Members are trying to put their differences aside and to find a way through. I salute a number of Members who have been able to do this.

Let me offer my own suggestion. Scotland voted to remain part of the European Union, as has been noted by Members in this House and by Members of Parliament from across the European Union. I suggest that bridges need to be built with our European partners economically. Whether we like it or not, this has been a shock to the system. It is really important. We need to build our economic ties. We would like to see support for immigration. If we can keep the Environment Secretary to his promises on immigration, that will be a good start. Scotland stands ready to try to rebuild those ties. Our economic ties with the rest of the United Kingdom are obviously important, but those with the single market and the rest of the European Union are crucial as well. I appeal to Members: look at your own statistics, look at the damage that is being done, and reach out to the devolved Administrations and to other Governments. This will hit our public services. We see people switching off with regard to this debate, but they will not switch off when it comes to a hit to the NHS in terms of personnel and cash, and a hit to education and other services. We have asymmetrical devolution in the United Kingdom; we should use it.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) pointed out, it is International Ask a Question Day. My question to Government Members is: do you know what you are doing and are you aware of the devastating damage you are doing?

4.45 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I start by responding to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), who said that 62% of the people in

Scotland voted to remain in the EU. What they actually voted for was for the UK to remain in the EU, which is a totally different question. They did not vote for an independent Scotland to be in the EU.

In fact, as I have said in this House before, a majority in my constituency voted for the UK to leave the European Union. This information is based on research conducted by the University of East Anglia that broke down the Scottish vote in the EU referendum by Westminster constituency boundaries and found that 54% of voters in my constituency voted leave. Of course, this should come as no surprise when one considers that my constituency is home to several large fishing communities and active ports. About 35% of the UK's white fish landings come in through the towns of Peterhead, Fraserburgh and Macduff in my constituency.

A University of Aberdeen study conducted ahead of the EU referendum found that 92% of British fishermen planned to vote leave. The study was of fishermen across the UK, but 68% of the sample was made up of Scottish fishermen. Fishing communities around the whole UK have suffered for decades under the common fisheries policy, and this is a historic wrong that must be put right. We owe it to all our fishing communities to make a success of our post-Brexit fisheries management. When we leave the EU, we leave the common fisheries policy and become an independent coastal state. We must not weaken our hand in future annual coastal state negotiations by bargaining away access to our exclusive economic zone as part of a longer-term trade deal with the EU. With regard to reciprocal access, it is worth noting that compared with the 100,000 tonnes of fish caught in EU waters by UK vessels, the amount caught by EU vessels in UK waters is 700,000 tonnes. British fishermen catch only 40% of fish in UK waters, compared with 84% by Norwegian vessels in their waters and 95% by Icelandic vessels in theirs.

It is not just the fishermen who want us to leave the EU. A survey in *The Scottish Farmer* found that two thirds of Scottish farmers said they had voted to leave the EU. The National Farmers Union of Scotland believes the result to have been closer to 50:50, but it cannot be denied that a great many Scottish farmers will be glad to see the back of the EU and the common agricultural policy. A single common agricultural policy that was designed to work in a common way from the Arctic circle in the north all the way down to the Mediterranean led to an over-complicated, bureaucratic, “one size fits none” system. Scotland's food and drink industry is too important to neglect. Globally renowned Scotch salmon and whisky are not just important to the Scottish economy but among the UK's top exports.

I am very encouraged by the UK Government's commitment to deliver the same level of farm support until the end of this Parliament. I know that many members of the seafood processing community would like to know whether something similar can be done to match the funding that currently comes from the European maritime and fisheries fund.

As other hon. Members have said, one impact of Brexit where there is concern from farmers and fishermen, particularly those in the food processing business, is the ability to supplement their workforce with labour from inside and outside the European Union on a level playing field. In the long term, these industries must be made sustainable with local labour, but that is not going

to happen overnight, and in the interim period we will need a stopgap to ensure that the industry can continue to function. This was already an issue before Brexit, as there is not an infinite supply of EU labour for these industries. What is crucial, though, is that after we leave the EU we will take back control of our borders, our laws, our money and our waters.

4.49 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I apologise for not being able to be present for the conclusion of the debate tomorrow.

We should be very grateful that we have the opportunity over two days to discuss European affairs, but it is a reminder that there is one thing Ministers do not want us to be doing, which is voting on any amendments to keep us in a customs union. This is definitely going to be remembered as the Brexit Parliament. It is undoubtedly the Back Benchers' Parliament. At the moment, it is running the risk of becoming the voteless Parliament, because business managers are scrambling around to fill the time with anything other than votes on important matters. Ministers are not going to be able to put those votes off permanently.

One of the reasons that there is so much support for the idea of remaining in a customs union was alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) in his excellent opening speech, and that is that it would provide part of the solution to the problem of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, which continues to rumble unresolved under the surface of the Brexit negotiations.

The truth is that the House divides into two camps on the subject of the border. There is one view that says, "It's all right," because there will be a technological solution that will get around the incompatibility between the policy the Government have adopted, with the very high bar they have rightly set of no checks, no infrastructure and an open border, and their determination to leave the single market and the customs union at the same time. The second view, which I share, is that we cannot currently see how those two contradictions can be resolved.

We have been taking evidence in the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union and looking at free trade agreements all over the world. Every single one of them—every single one—involves some checks on some goods. It does not matter whether it is Norway and Sweden or Canada and the United States of America. Even the much quoted but clearly little read by its proponents European Parliament report "Smart Border 2.0" acknowledges that, even with the most up-to-date technology, there would still need to be physical infrastructure, which is not compatible with maintaining an open border. Of course, the Government published their two documents last summer and we should explore all the options. I recognise that the suspension of belief is essential to the magician's art, but it is not a very sound foundation for Government policy.

Although we are none the wiser about what is going to happen in Northern Ireland, we did learn, in fairness, a bit more about the Prime Minister's approach in her Mansion House speech. Despite all the advance briefing about ambitious managed divergence, which I hope has

now disappeared into the dustbin of history, the Prime Minister did speak a great deal about maintaining regulatory alignment. I welcome that.

The other thing that was striking about that speech was the frankness with which the Prime Minister acknowledged that we will inevitably have less access to our most important market, compared with what we have at the moment. It has taken a long time to get to this point of realism. Who remembers "We're going to get the exact same benefits," which was the Secretary of State's cry for many months?

The truth—that we are going to have less access—is the reason why the pound fell after the referendum. It is why the UK has gone from being one of the fastest growing of the world's advanced economies to the slowest, which has just been confirmed. The question remains for the House: what is the right approach to manage the risks of damage to the British economy as the process unfolds?

I think we all agree that continuing tariff-free trade is essential, and I simply say that the most effective way of achieving that would be to remain in a customs union with the European Union. We have heard from the Minister that 43% or 44% of our exports go to this market, and a further 17% go to countries with which we have trade agreements. It would be great if, in responding today, the Minister could confirm how the Government are getting on with ensuring that those agreements will roll over during the transitional period, so that businesses know the terms on which they will trade.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has touched on the issue of businesses. Companies such as Jaguar Land Rover in my constituency do not know where they are in relation to regulation of research and development, and there is nothing forthcoming from the Government on that.

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is one of a whole host of examples that Members on both sides of the House are aware of. Businesses in our constituencies are asking how it is going to work, because at the moment we do not know.

Staying in a customs union is what the CBI wants, and I am afraid that the Government's policy on international trade is one of Micawberism. Given the fondness of the President of the United States for punitive tariffs and the clear desire of the American Administration to open up our agricultural market, which is not what the Environment Secretary said he wants, do we really think that concluding a trade agreement with the US is going to happen any time soon? Do we really think we are going to get a trade deal with India before we have agreed to give more visas to its citizens?

The Minister for Trade Policy who opened the debate is no longer in his place, but the idea that being in the European Union has somehow stopped us trading with the rest of the world is nonsense. If that were the case, how is it that our largest single trading partner in the world is a country with which we do not have a trade agreement—the United States? If that is the case, why is it that our trade with China has increased by 64% since 2010 and China is now our fifth largest trading partner?

Having said all that, there are areas in which the European Union needs to show greater flexibility in the negotiations. It has done particular, different or special

[Hilary Benn]

deals with its external partners—Canada, Norway, Ukraine, Switzerland and Turkey. Let us take the example of our continued participation in EU agencies, which are very important to business and therefore to trade. When the Prime Minister mentioned the European Aviation Safety Agency, the European Medicines Agency and the European Chemicals Agency, the European Union's response—basically, “No. You can't take part. They're the rules. Forget it!”—was spectacularly ill-judged.

We should say to all those we speak to in Europe, “Now, come on. You could have said, ‘Let's sit down and talk about how we can do this, but you'll have to pay, you'll have to abide by the rules and you'll have to accept judgments of the European Court of Justice.’” Such an approach should not be a problem for the Government because, in the Prime Minister's speech on security in Munich, she said that to maintain co-operation on security, we would accept the remit of the ECJ. That is another example of reality beginning to dawn on the red lines of the Government's policy.

Caroline Lucas: On the gulf between what was promised and what is now being delivered, both economically and on the issue of Northern Ireland, would the right hon. Gentleman at least be willing to keep an open mind on the merits and wisdom of the people having a say on the Brexit deal?

Hilary Benn: Although I am tempted by the hon. Lady's intervention to get into my views, which I think are well known, about a second referendum, I hope she will forgive me if I do not do so, in view of the pressure of time.

The other issue I want to mention is timing. Although we are two thirds of the way through the withdrawal process, we have not even started negotiating our future relationship with a deal that is meant to stand us in good stead for decades to come, and it is not something that can be done in a hurry. I therefore make a plea for flexibility both during the remainder of the article 50 period and during the transition period, when the bulk of the negotiations will be done.

Since this is a debate about European affairs, I want to talk about some of the broader challenges we face in Europe and about Britain's contribution to addressing them at a time when so much of our effort, energy and time is being spent dealing with the consequences of Brexit. Let us take the nerve agent attack in Salisbury. This is exactly the circumstance in which we need a multilateral response—the Prime Minister spoke about that today—and, in the case of Europe, we need the closest possible co-operation. Yet this is also the moment when we are undermining such co-operation through Brexit, and pulling apart that relationship in the hope, which I accept is what the Prime Minister has said she wants, of then rebuilding it. In truth, the use of that nerve agent is exactly the reason we need to conclude swiftly an agreement for co-operation with the other 27 members on defence, security, foreign policy and the fight against terrorism.

There are so many other things to which we should be turning our attention. How are we going to sustain strong economies in Europe? How are we going to respond to what is a wave of nostalgia for an age gone by—people are trying to come to terms with change—that

informs much of the support for some political parties and movements right across Europe? When we look at the Mediterranean, we can see the extent of youth unemployment in north African countries and the challenges they face in meeting the needs of their populations. When we look at climate change, we should think of the people who will flee if droughts or downpours force them to do so, never mind the fact that people will in the end kill each other not because of their different political views, but because they are fighting over natural resources, including water. We should also think about threats to peace and security and about the onward march of technology, with the challenges and the fantastic opportunities that it will create.

While we wrestle with the desire for greater self-determination and control, we must not lose faith in the multilateral institutions—the European Union, the UN and others—that we created to give ourselves a better chance of dealing with those challenges. If we have learned one thing from the past 100 years, never mind the past 1,000 years, it is that, to be able to look after ourselves, we must look after others, and to do that successfully we have to learn to work together.

4.59 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who, as ever, was very eloquent. I heartily endorse his point about using multilateral institutions, but I fear that the failure of Europe to act in an appropriately tough way after the murder of Litvinenko may well have led the Russian state to think that it could have another go here. I would have argued for sanctions to be applied, particularly against Russia's gas exports, as I think that that would have had a big impact. I support the right hon. Gentleman's calls and the solidarity shown by Europe, but I ask it to go further and to consider strict measures against the Russian state.

I want to address the importance of not so much our trade in goods, but our trade in services, which has been under-represented in many of our debates on Europe. I do so particularly in the light of the rather aggressive statements by President Trump in the past few days. Services are vital for our prosperity. They constitute almost 80% of UK GDP and 80% of UK jobs, as well as 45% of our exports. A large proportion of our service exports go to Europe. In fact, this trade is worth £90 billion annually, which is more than the Government spend on transport, housing, the environment, industry, employment and agriculture combined. When we see it in those terms, we understand the importance of a deal for the service sector. That is not just about financial services, because it also includes sectors such as insurance, legal, cultural and digital services.

I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to an ambitious and comprehensive deal, which will be essential, as it will have to cover a range of sectors, including the service sectors, with their various requirements and needs. I therefore encourage Ministers to be bold. The exit analysis produced by a number of Departments, using the most up-to-date economic model, shows that the real threat to UK plc comes from non-tariff barriers. We can have a debate about the customs union, but I argue that it is non-tariff barriers that create the biggest threat to the UK economy.

Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of non-tariff barriers. The World Trade Organisation itself identified that there were 300 non-tariff barriers in 2010, and the figure rose to 1,200 by 2015. Does she agree that Great Britain can be a strong advocate of free trade in the WTO and can try to drive a reduction in not only tariffs, but non-tariff barriers?

Antoinette Sandbach: Of course there is nothing to prevent us from doing that at the moment. In fact, the number of non-tariff barriers has increased during our membership of the WTO, even though we are also a member of the EU. That is a real and significant danger to the UK economy.

I hope that we will look in detail at sectors such as the three that I want to address: digital, insurance and legal. The digital sector covers a huge range of industries. They are not just new tech businesses; they cover a wide range of services for many companies. They are exposed to the same risks as many other service industries, but they also have to contend with data protection rules that will impact on data flows after Brexit.

TechUK says that digital makes up 16% of UK output and 10% of UK employment. It is a significant export sector, and about 96% of output and 81% of exports are in services. That is key. It is vital that we look at an agreement that deals with cross-border data flows with not only Europe, although 75% of our data flows are with Europe. We are one of the most advanced countries for trading online. Our consumers are extremely educated in and knowledgeable about buying goods and services online. It is important that we look at how we address these issues in a future deal.

Even if we maintain identical regulation with the EU, there are questions regarding the legal basis on which companies can transfer data between the UK and the EU27. It would be for the European Commission to assess whether we had achieved adequacy. Failure to achieve adequacy could force localisation or the redirection of an EU citizen's data. That fragmentation could create significant costs for UK businesses, which would have to implement alternative legal structures. According to one study, cross-EU data localisation could cost between 0.4% and 1.1% of GDP, and lead to significant drops in private investment and a drop in service exports. The uncertainty over whether a deal will be struck could see companies restrict the amount of data they store and process in the UK in the short term. Clearly, we welcome the Prime Minister's recognition that we will seek more than just an adequacy arrangement and that we want an appropriate ongoing role for the UK's Information Commissioner's Office, but it is vital that we actually deliver on that and do so quickly.

The second area I want to address is UK legal services. The UK legal services industry has made it absolutely clear that the CETA model does not provide a comprehensive framework for professional services. I would argue that the Government need to be looking at Norway-minus, not Canada-plus-plus-plus. It is clear that the impact of no deal on services in the legal industry would be more dramatic than it would be on the insurance industry. That is because a widely established series of EU directives has created a really well functioning market in legal services in the EU. The sector is worth £26 billion to the UK, which is the equivalent of 1.5% of GDP, and employs more than 3,800 people, often in

highly paid and high-skilled jobs. In 2016, there was a net export of £4 billion from the legal services sector into Europe.

It is vital that, when we look at the customs union, the EEA should be the plan B. I agree very much with what my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) said. We absolutely support the Prime Minister in going out and getting that deep and special partnership and deal, but if for any reason we cannot achieve that deal, the plan B should be an EEA/EFTA-style deal. That should be the fall-back, not WTO arrangements. If any of my constituents wonder how I have reached that conclusion, they should look online—it is on the parliamentary website—at the analysis that has been produced across Departments indicating that an EEA-style departure or agreement would be the least damaging option for the UK economy. That would still allow us to go out and strike trade deals—there are trade deals with 57 other countries—and to go into a potential market of 900 million people. We could still do fantastic trade with the Chinese, because when the Prime Minister returned from her recent China visit, she had signed £9 billion-worth of trade deals. I would argue that that option needs to be very seriously considered by the Government as a plan B.

5.9 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), whose thinking in some respects is very similar to mine.

Unfortunately, we are in a situation in which a Conservative Government find themselves in the unenviable position of not having a majority in Parliament while there are big divisions among their Back Benchers. They have an arrogant disregard for the practical realities they face, particularly with regard to their negotiation stance with the EU27 on Brexit. From “Brexit means Brexit” to “deep and special relationship”, and now “managed divergence”, it is clear that the Prime Minister is trying to find forms of words that will hold her party together, rather than producing a firm negotiating stance that is clearly understood by the EU and has a reasonable chance of success.

The marriage of convenience between the Conservative party and the Democratic Unionist party can be sustained only by the additional payment of £1 billion to Northern Ireland and an agreement over not having a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This marriage is predicated, obviously, not only on a payment from the Exchequer to Belfast, but on the understanding that the free movement of goods, services and people across the border between the north and south of Ireland can be negotiated successfully with the EU27 without the UK having access to the single market or being in the customs union. Currently, that seems highly unlikely at best, and impossible at worst.

Without an agreement on access to the single market, as well as some agreement on a customs union, it is difficult to see how the Democratic Unionists can avoid a hard border. Current indications from Brussels give the impression that the EU27 will not be willing to agree on an open border unless there is some agreement in those two areas. All in all, the Government have a huge mountain to climb, are badly equipped to do so,

[*Sir Mark Hendrick*]

and seem to think that the solution is to placate their own Back Benchers, rather than carrying out serious negotiations with our European neighbours.

It is now 21 months since the referendum and there is still little agreement between the EU and the UK on many key issues. The leave campaign promised that an extra £350 million a week could be spent on the NHS if we left the European Union. We now find a Government with a Foreign Secretary who was one of the leaders of the leave campaign and who said that the EU could “go whistle” when it became clear that the UK had to pay to leave the European Union to meet obligations that had already been agreed with the EU. On the contrary, the Government have now agreed to pay £40 billion to £50 billion to exit the EU. That is in sharp contrast to the £350 million a week that was going to come back into the NHS.

The so-called “sufficient progress” that was claimed to have been made in the first phase of Brexit still overlooks the details of what would be required to deal with a hard border with Ireland and to guarantee citizens’ rights in a manner acceptable to the UK and the EU. Within the phase 2 negotiations that should focus on the framework of a future relationship, we find that the EU is focusing on a “framework” while the UK talks about a “future relationship”. Little seems to be agreed about whether the transitional deal can be extended beyond two years, and a date of October this year to formalise talks on a transition is far too late to give businesses throughout the UK any sort of certainty about how they can continue to conduct business with companies in the EU27 states.

My view is similar to that of the hon. Member for Eddisbury: the UK should have adopted a negotiating stance of realising an outcome similar to the position of Norway, which has access to the single market despite the fact that it is not a member of the EU. On top of that, I would have liked to have seen a discussion about a customs union that would be far better than Turkey’s, which we could have negotiated with the EU27 in good faith. However, we have a Prime Minister who says that we do not want to be in the single market or the customs union. She wants a bespoke trade deal just for the UK, but she seems oblivious to the fact that such a proposal would seriously undermine the European single market and is therefore totally unacceptable to the EU.

The introduction of the concept of “managed divergence” seems to be more about managing the diverse range of views among Conservative Back Benchers than managing emerging differences between EU and UK regulations. The Chequers Brexit awayday, which was held to achieve a truce between the warring factions of the Conservative party, resulted in a negotiating stance of “ambitious managed divergence”. That form of words satisfied both the Brexiteers and the remainers, but it will find no support in the EU27 when these hard-headed negotiations finally get going.

The EU wants the Prime Minister to come forward with her vision of a future relationship between the EU and the UK. The managed divergence she talks about is known as the “three basket” approach, because it has three tiers: a core tier, where the UK would agree to align fully with EU regulations and adopt new rules

automatically; a middle tier, where there would be a form of managed mutual recognition of rules, such as for environmental protection; and an outer tier, where the UK would be free to diverge from EU rules with no consequences for market access, whether or not those areas are in the single market’s *acquis*. The notion that the EU will be willing to accept three baskets of regulations in its trading arrangements with the UK is delusional and makes the British Government themselves look like a basket case.

This whole Brexit catastrophe is like watching a car crash in slow motion, except that the driver, the Prime Minister, is holding her hands over her eyes and trying to convince the passengers—her own party and the public—that everything will turn out fine. It can only result in humiliation for the Prime Minister when it is made clear that managed divergence is not acceptable and that this inflexible attitude towards the single market, the customs union and, for that matter, the European Court of Justice cannot continue. One can envisage the outcome being a hard Brexit. That hard Brexit is the favoured option of some of the Brexiteers in her party, but it could destroy any hope of a soft border between the north and the south of Ireland.

The Prime Minister should stiffen her resolve and tell her recalcitrant Back Benchers that our trading relationship with the EU is still important, even though we are leaving the EU. She should get down to serious negotiations that will preserve jobs and businesses up and down this country, instead of leading us off a cliff edge that will result in a WTO-style agreement.

5.16 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I would like to focus on the ongoing negotiations between Scotland’s two Governments on the powers set to be transferred from Brussels to the Scottish Parliament, which will have an impact on Scotland’s ability to do business and trade, especially if we get it wrong.

While those negotiations are ongoing, and in the light of the fact that the UK Government have now published their amendment to clause 11 of the EU withdrawal Bill, the SNP Scottish Government are rushing another Brexit Bill through the Scottish Parliament. The EU withdrawal Bill may have its faults, but it is at least legal; the same cannot be said of the SNP Government’s so-called continuity Bill, which is currently being considered by Holyrood. It has been ruled unlawful by the Scottish Parliament’s Presiding Officer and strongly criticised as inconsistent by a range of experts, yet it is still being rushed through in a few days with minimal scrutiny by MSPs.

Stewart Hosie: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be very clear in his words. The continuity Bill has not been declared illegal by anyone. The Presiding Officer has raised a question over its competency, but as the hon. Gentleman well knows, the Lord Advocate has said that it has been carefully drafted so that it is not incompatible with EU law and does nothing to alter EU law until after Brexit, and he made the rather serious point that it is simply preparing for Brexit in exactly the same way as the UK’s withdrawal Bill. I hope, therefore, for the sake of clarity and accuracy, that the “illegal” word will be withdrawn.

John Lamont: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's point, although I suggest he read very carefully what the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament has said, and I remind him that the Lord Advocate is a Scottish Government Minister and so of course supports the Scottish Government's proposal. The Presiding Officer is the ultimate determiner of which Bills are competent to come through the Scottish Government.

Paul Masterton: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the narrative appears to be being perpetuated that the Presiding Officer sat in his office one evening, read the draft Bill and reached the conclusion on competency on his own, as opposed to having received a range of extensive and incredibly high-quality legal advice from a range of Scotland's leading law firms?

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The Presiding Officer has done this not in a vacuum but with the advice of the Scottish Parliament's lawyers and others, and it is misjudged by the Scottish Government to think they can push ahead regardless of his view.

Just 11 MSPs are currently considering and voting on more than 230 amendments to the Bill in what was originally planned to be a single sitting that started at a quarter to six last night. Late nights may not be unusual here, but it is unprecedented in the Scottish Parliament for so many amendments to be given so little time to be considered. I remind Members that the Chamber of the Scottish Parliament is given only one opportunity to consider a Bill in detail, and that it has no revising Chamber to make improvements at a later stage. To force through so many amendments in so little time is not the way to legislate. The fact that Opposition MSPs were able to identify hundreds of problems with the Bill with only a handful of days in which to consider it should be a wake-up call for the Scottish Government.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman referred to the lawfulness of the continuity Bill. Does he agree that in Wales the Presiding Officer has deemed it lawful?

John Lamont: The legislation that created the Scottish Parliament is very different from that which created the Welsh Assembly. I do not know whether the powers are similar, but, having served in the Scottish Parliament for 10 years, I do know that it is for the Presiding Officer to determine whether Bills are competent to be considered by the Scottish Parliament, and the Scottish Parliament's Presiding Officer was very clear about the fact that this Bill was not competent.

If passed, the Bill would give Scottish Ministers a raft of powers, including the power to decide which bits of EU law they wanted to adopt in domestic law. Those decisions should rest with the Scottish Parliament, and that, I suggest, is the real power grab. It will do nothing to help Scotland to trade, or to protect businesses in Scotland that trade with the rest of the EU or, indeed, with countries around the world. The fact that the SNP Government are pushing the Bill through Holyrood, ignoring the views of the Presiding Officer and avoiding any meaningful scrutiny by MSPs, shows what the SNP really thinks of the Scottish Parliament and democratic accountability.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I have a huge amount of respect for the hon. Gentleman, but I hope he will put on the record that the only party in the Scottish Parliament that opposes the Bill is the Conservative party. Otherwise, on a cross-party basis, the democratically elected Scottish Parliament supports it. As for the hon. Gentleman's point about the Committee system, he is a former Member of that Parliament, and he knows fine well that the legislation is scrutinised in Committee.

John Lamont: I also understand the huge inadequacies of the Committee system in the Scottish Parliament. The other place here is not perfect, but at least it has the ability to amend and genuinely scrutinise. Yesterday, there were more than four and a half hours of debate on the continuity Bill. How many hours, how many minutes, did Back-Bench SNP MSPs contribute to that? Just over two minutes. That shows the level of accountability to which SNP MSPs subject their Government in the Scottish Parliament.

Ever since the introduction of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill—in fact, ever since the result of EU referendum was known—the SNP has been desperately trying to make Brexit into an excuse to have another go at independence, but I am pleased to say that Scots are not buying it. As Professor Curtice has just pointed out, “rather than creating a bandwagon in favour of independence, Brexit served to expose a fissure in the nationalist movement that Nicola Sturgeon has struggled to straddle.”

The introduction of the SNP's continuity Bill is just the latest attempt at that. The Bill is damaging because it makes a deal on these powers—a deal that the SNP claims it wants to make—less rather than more likely. It is also damaging because it adds yet more constitutional uncertainty at an already difficult time, and it will do nothing to increase Scotland's ability to trade with the rest of the EU and, just as important, with other countries.

Moreover, the Bill is unnecessary, because we now have an amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill that essentially flips clause 11 around and that is accompanied by a list from the UK Government of the areas where a UK common framework is necessary. No such list, I note, has been produced by the Scottish Government. Those frameworks are critical to our ability to trade throughout the United Kingdom and in those other countries.

But let us take a step back from the rhetoric and grandstanding of the nationalists on the Benches opposite and, indeed, in the Scottish Government. If we take that step back, we see that this is really a minor disagreement. The list of powers that the SNP claims are being taken away from the Scottish Parliament relate to, for instance, late payment of commercial debts and the labelling of honey. These might well be important powers, but is aviation noise management really being discussed around the dinner tables of Scotland, or is the talk of the pub really who is going to control good laboratory practice? I think not. More importantly, despite the rhetoric of a power grab the reality is that not a single one of these powers is being taken away from the Scottish Parliament, for the simple fact is that the Scottish Parliament does not control these powers currently; Brussels does. And the majority of these powers are going to be coming to the Scottish Parliament; the so-called power-grabbers in Westminster are going

[John Lamont]

to be sending new powers Holyrood's way, and that is after passing a Scotland Act in 2016, which has already made Holyrood one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world.

Despite talk of a crisis, the UK and Scottish Governments agreed on the way forward; the vast majority of these powers which have been built up in Brussels will be coming back to the Scottish Parliament. Some will, however require UK-wide frameworks and both the UK and Scottish Governments agree on this approach.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): If we were playing a little game here that for every time the hon. Gentleman mentioned the SNP we would have a drink, we would be drunk by now. I remember the days not so long ago when he believed that the consent of the Scottish Parliament would be required before these frameworks were agreed and put forward. What has happened?

John Lamont: We accept that the consent of the Scottish Parliament is required, but the hon. Gentleman's party leader, Nicola Sturgeon, in Holyrood is deliberately creating the politics of grievance. She is creating division and deliberately not reaching that agreement, to stoke up what the Scottish nationalists think is going to get them to their ultimate goal: a second referendum on independence. We are having none of it; we are having absolutely none of it.

It makes sense to ensure that businesses do not face the risk of new barriers to trade with other parts of the UK. The Scottish Government accept that, for example, different labelling requirements or different regulations on pesticides across the UK would stifle trade and are not in the interests of Scottish businesses. So the only disagreement is over how this approach is implemented, which is hardly the making of a constitutional crisis and is hardly an excuse to push through unlawful and rushed legislation, as the SNP is currently doing in the Scottish Parliament.

Karin Smyth: It is always fascinating for the rest of us to listen to the debate going on among Scottish colleagues on this issue, but, talking about the Union, is the hon. Gentleman not remotely concerned that his Government are being propped up by the 10 votes of the Democratic Unionist party in this Chamber? Does he not think that perhaps the demands that austerity and Brexit are forcing on our constituencies are having a greater effect of undermining the Union than what he is currently talking about?

John Lamont: I totally reject that suggestion. The Prime Minister has been clear that her objective through Brexit is to achieve the best deal for all parts of the United Kingdom, including Scotland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Time is up.

5.27 pm

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I welcome this debate, but I do not welcome the fact that the Government continually duck having votes in this House on these matters, or that they continue to do everything they can to withhold appropriate information so that we can come to an informed view on behalf of our constituents.

My view is that when we are asked to vote on the withdrawal agreement that the Prime Minister is supposed to return to this House with in the autumn, we should be granted a free vote given the magnitude of the agreement and what we are dealing with and its importance for future generations in this country.

As we can see every single day, it is clear that the Brexit process has been a total and utter mess. Article 50 should never have been invoked at the time that it was invoked; we should have had the debate we are having now before it was invoked. It is extraordinary that we have only been given serious detail by the Prime Minister this month, more than a year and a half after she took office and when we are halfway through these Brexit negotiations. Only now do we seem to have more clarity from the Government on the direction in which they wish to take this country in these Brexit negotiations.

I give the Prime Minister this: her speech was significant because for the first time it officially acknowledged what we know to be true, which is that the Government are voluntarily choosing to pursue a policy that they have admitted is going to make this country poorer. She made it clear in her speech that we were going to get less access and that we would not have a frictionless border. She talked about achieving as frictionless a border as possible—[*Interruption.*] It is no use Ministers shaking their heads. We know from the impact assessments that they commissioned from their own civil servants that the options they are choosing to pursue will make this country poorer. Let us be clear about this. We hear all this talk about our EU friends seeking to bully our country and to punish us, but they are not doing that. At the outset, they put a range of options on the table, including remaining a member of the single market and the customs union, and it was this Prime Minister who took those options off the table.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right. Our European partners have said clearly that the red lines that this Government have set themselves mean that the goals they wish to achieve are impossible. We cannot blame our EU partners for that, because they are the Government's own red lines.

Chuka Umunna: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is the Prime Minister who is dictating the kind of agreement that we will reach with the European Union.

Let us be clear about what has happened since 2016. In March 2016, the Office for Budget Responsibility was forecasting that our economy would grow by 2.1% this year, next year and the year after. However, because of the judgments and decisions that this Government have made, the OBR is now forecasting that our economy will grow by a paltry 1.5% this year, 1.3% next year and 1.3% the year after. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) is chuntering in his place, but I say to him that I cannot remember a time since the war when a GDP forecast was coming in at under 2% for every year. This forecast is a result of the policy decisions that he is making.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The Government's strategy on these negotiations is a shambles, as my hon. Friend has indicated. More importantly, however, they are banking on the Trump Administration bailing them out. They think they are going to get great deals from the Trump

Administration, but if we look at agriculture, for example, we can see that they are not going to get any great deals at all.

Chuka Umunna: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and I will say more about that shortly.

One of the most extraordinary things about the Prime Minister's speech was that she did not explain how the future relationship that she set out was going to help the NHS, particularly given that so many of her Cabinet Ministers went around telling us that voting to leave the European Union would lead to a bounty for the NHS. The number of EU nurse applications is down 96%, and we lost 10,000 health workers from our NHS in the year after the referendum vote. We now have 100,000 vacancies in the NHS that need to be filled. There was no mention at all of this in her speech. I think it was the director of the Vote Leave campaign, Dominic Cummings, who said that if people such as the Foreign Secretary, the Environment Secretary and the Trade Secretary had not gone round saying what they said about the NHS, we would not be in this situation today.

Let me return to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) has just made about new trade deals. I agree with the Minister for Trade Policy that there is not an either/or choice about whether we pursue trade with the EU or with the rest of the world, even though that argument is often made from the Government Dispatch Box. Let us get real about this. This is not a question about whether this country is going to be able to do trade deals after we have left the European Union. We will be able to do trade deals after we have left the EU—if we leave the EU—but the question is: on what terms? When we negotiate with China with its 1.2 billion people, we are not going to get the same terms we now enjoy as we negotiate alongside 500 million people on our side of the table. We, a country of 65 million people, are not going to get the same terms, because we are a much smaller economy relative to the big economies that we want to trade with. That is the reality. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South is absolutely right to refer to President Trump. He is not going to ride to our rescue. We need only look at what he is doing to our steel industry with his 25% tariffs.

My final observation about the Prime Minister's speech is that I have not spoken to any diplomat, EU ambassador or EU Foreign Minister who thinks that this Government's technological solution to the hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland will resolve the issue. Nobody I have spoken to believes that that will happen.

What does that lead me to conclude? The form of Brexit that was sold to the British people is simply not deliverable. I will give this to the Government: it is not necessarily simply a matter of competence; it is the reality that so many of the promises that were made to people, whether they voted leave or remain, simply cannot be delivered. That is one reason why I think that—the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) made this point—if we are to leave the European Union, we should at the very least seek to keep this country's full participation in the customs union and, to my mind, in the single market. As far as I am concerned, if someone wants to end austerity and to promote social justice, they have to support that position. Being part of the framework of

the single market and the customs union would be no impediment to the implementation of the Labour manifesto, to our pursuing the nationalisations that we want or to other matters.

One of the things that I am most struck by as I go around my constituency at the moment is that many members of the public are just fed up with the Brexit process. They just want it to be gone. They want us to get on with it. But there is a recognition that the process is far more complex than anybody had thought and that it is throwing up all kinds of issues that nobody thought would be connected to Brexit. Who on earth would have thought that Brexit would be connected to the transport of isotopes used for medical research and cancer treatment?

However, the group of people in my constituency who have the most visceral and strong views about what is going on are the young people. They believe that what is going on is robbing them of the opportunities that older generations have taken for granted. They cannot understand why we would want to be doing this to them. That is why I think this House should have a free vote on the matter. The issue transcends party politics and politics more broadly. It is an issue of national interest, and I do not believe that the younger generation will ever forgive us, the generation of politicians sitting in this House of Commons, if we do not do the right thing by them and secure their futures, ensuring that they have the same opportunities that all of us enjoy now in the European Union.

5.37 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): As someone who actually represents, I hope, the young people of the next generation, I do not share the pessimism of the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna), because the great Brexit prize will be regaining our ability to strike new free trade deals across the world. Not only will Britain rejoin the rest of the world, but we will have the opportunity to lead the rest of the world as a global free-trading nation, championing trade liberalisation and taking on the voices of protectionism. Let me be clear that we are not leaving Europe or turning our backs on our European neighbours and partners. Rather, the Prime Minister has been explicit that the Government are seeking a deep and comprehensive trade deal with the EU that covers goods and services.

By leaving the customs union, the UK will regain its ability to set its own independent trade policy. Our trade with the EU is in deficit and declining. As the Minister stated in his opening remarks, it was 56% in 2006 and is now down to 43%. However, our trade with the rest of the world is in surplus and rising. We should not play down the importance of Europe as a trading market and partner, but we must orient ourselves towards the thriving economies in the rest of the world, such as in south and east Asia, and their growing demand for goods and services. Fifty-seven per cent. of Britain's exports are now to outside the EU compared with only 46% in 2006. Furthermore, the International Monetary Fund estimates that 90% of global economic growth in the next 10 to 15 years will originate from outside the EU.

International demands for British goods is growing, and Aberdeen, which I represent, is well placed to take advantage of that as 90% of the city's manufacturing,

[Ross Thomson]

which is mainly in oil and gas and environmental engineering, gets exported. The oil and gas industry is truly global, and anchored right here in the UK. Current industry exports accounted for 43% of the UK supply chain turnover in 2017, up from 41% in 2016. Oil & Gas UK's "Vision 2035" has the ambitious aim of doubling the supply chain share of the global market from 3.7% to 7.4% in 2035.

The Balmoral Group, based in my constituency, provides an example. It was established back in 1980 and specialises in sub-sea buoyancy, renewable energy and engineering solutions. It employs about 500 people in Aberdeen. It is highly dependent on the export market: it is currently focusing on west Africa, South America and the gulf of Mexico. Its representatives have been clear with me that their only opportunity for growth is in the export market. They have already been working closely with the Department for International Trade on trying to exploit those opportunities.

Thanks to the investment from the UK Government, the Oil & Gas Technology Centre in my constituency was set up. It is working with the oil industry in developing solutions, new technology and innovation to maximise the full potential of the UK North sea—from asset integrity to maximising recovery from small pools, from drilling to decommissioning. The technology, developed in my constituency, is exportable and the opportunities are massive.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) highlighted, the north-east is home to a thriving food and drink industry. It is also known for its whisky exports. The story of whisky is well known; perhaps a less told story is that about our other domestic exports. Here are just a few examples. In fishing, there are companies such as Macduff Shellfish, Denholm Seafoods and Lunar Freezing, which export to countries such as Nigeria, China, Vietnam, Uruguay and Ukraine.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): During the EU referendum campaign, the hon. Gentleman was pictured outside the Scottish Parliament with a placard saying, "Vote leave to bring control of our fishing back to the democratically elected Scottish Parliament". Will he be recirculating that image?

Ross Thomson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that. As is so clear, we are leaving the European Union and taking back control of the more than 200 nautical miles of our waters, giving us the opportunity to rejuvenate our coastal communities. We are supporting Scottish fishermen. The party that wants to sell them down the river back to Brussels, handing all the powers right back and keeping people trapped within the confines of the common fisheries policy, is every single Member from the SNP. I will take no lectures from those on the SNP Benches about the benefits of Brexit for fishermen.

Stephen Gethins *rose*—

Ross Thomson: I would like to make some progress, given that I have only three minutes left.

Companies in Aberdeen such as Saltire Seed and Alan Twatt are exporting seed potatoes to Thailand, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Brazil. Those are just some examples of what is happening in my region.

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Gentleman is talking about the economy. Does he believe the figures that the UK Government have produced about the hit to GDP from leaving the EU?

Ross Thomson: No. The figures that have been produced are not based on what the Prime Minister has said herself she wants to achieve: a deep and special relationship with Europe. None of the figures is based on that assumption.

There are huge opportunities for Aberdeen and the wider north-east to use our competitive advantage to seize the benefits of Brexit. We must set our sights on the future—a new global future. It would not be in our or the EU's interests for there to be any unnecessary restrictions on trade. I am confident that the Prime Minister will deliver a new, bespoke partnership that will support our mutual interests. The UK is the world's fifth largest economy, the fifth largest exporter and the second greatest soft power. Our worldwide presence is reinforced by our global brands, our creative industries and the reputation of our universities. Britain is truly global and we must be ambitious in order to maximise the golden Brexit trade opportunities that lie ahead of us.

5.45 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): I want to start by talking about the approaching constitutional crisis that this Government are threatening to bring about. This Tory Government continue to put the established constitutional order and devolution settlements at risk with their blatant grab of devolved powers. After months of debating and meetings, they are still struggling to grasp the concept of the consent of our devolved Administrations. We must not see powers that are devolved under the current devolution settlement going from Brussels to Westminster without consent from Cardiff and Edinburgh. During the last meeting of the JMC, the Welsh Government were told that the UK Government would not be pressing amendments on this to a vote before further discussions, and today it is down to the Prime Minister and the First Ministers of both Wales and Scotland to try to end this stalemate. However, I do not see any new offer coming forward and time is running out. It is very troubling that, even though the Welsh Government compromised by accepting that several rules and regulations currently decided in Brussels will need to be operated on a UK-wide basis, this UK Government cannot bring themselves to reassure the devolved Administrations that their consent and agreement will be sought. This is just not good enough.

In Wales, we are being expected to accept that decisions on up to 24 policy areas, including agriculture, pesticides, animal welfare, organic farming and the environment, are to be taken in Westminster, without any consultation and without consent from Cardiff.

Paul Masterton: Will the hon. Lady tell us how much influence the Welsh Government currently have in the setting of those frameworks within the EU and whether the EU obtains the consent of the Welsh Government when setting them?

Anna McMorris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but he is completely missing the point. We are looking at those powers coming back to Westminster,

and they should be going back to Cardiff and Edinburgh where those powers are devolved. Both Cardiff and Edinburgh—Wales and Scotland—play a part in those discussions at EU level all the time.

David Linden: I am sure the hon. Lady will agree that the devolution settlement is clear that, if something is not reserved when it returns to us, it is then devolved. That is why this is a power grab in respect of the devolved settlement.

Anna McMorris: I agree that this constitutes an absolute power grab by this UK Government. Until we see substantive changes to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, there is the need for the continuity Bill. It would be preferable to continue to protect devolution via the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill—that is what I want to see—but should agreement not be reached, the continuity Bill becomes one of the most important pieces of legislation ever to be scrutinised by the Welsh Assembly.

May I pay tribute to my colleague Mark Drakeford, a Cabinet Secretary in Wales, and the Welsh Government for pursuing that important piece of legislation, in the absence of an agreement being forthcoming from this Tory UK Government? The Bill is complex, but very clear in its aims. It is intended to deal with the inevitable consequences in domestic law of withdrawal from the EU by preserving EU law covering subjects already devolved to Wales; and it will enable Welsh Ministers to make necessary changes to ensure that legislation works at the point of withdrawal. That is what we need to see.

The Tory Government have questions to answer, not just for Cardiff and Edinburgh but for people everywhere—people in my constituency of Cardiff North, in Wales, in the UK, and our friends and allies throughout Europe. After months of the Government's trying to cover up the Brexit impact assessments, MPs were finally allowed to see them, as I did. I made the appointment, handed over my phone, which was locked up in a cupboard, and was allowed the hour given to look at them. A week later, they were distributed everywhere. I was concerned to read that the Government's own assessment is that this country's economic growth will suffer under any of the existing models for a future relationship with the EU. Under the worst-case scenario, a WTO-type agreement, which has often been hailed by Conservative Members as a perfectly acceptable option, GDP could decline by up to 7.7% cumulatively over 15 years. There was certainly no good news anywhere in those impact analyses.

In the past couple of months, I have had my own meetings with representatives from UK and EU businesses, including Airbus, L'Oréal and companies from the pharmaceutical industry. The concerns are always the same: we need more clarity and a solid plan. If we are leaving the single market and the customs union, how will the Government ensure that the "Mad Max" dystopia that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union himself described will not become a reality? If it is not "Mad Max", why is it that any time that representatives from British industry—such as the Confederation of British Industry—or politics interact with our European counterparts in Germany, France and elsewhere, we are treated as if we live in la-la land?

When will the Government face the challenges of the unrealistic standards of their own internal party politics, which they have set to serve their own infatuation with an isolated Britain that has long gone? When will the Government tell us the truth about the effects of leaving the customs union and single market and offer a plan that, at the very least, does not feel like a suicide mission? When will they offer a plan that safeguards the future of our businesses and protects environmental and workers' rights, our services, our people and our communities?

5.52 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): This is an extremely important debate. The 27 other countries in the EU make up our largest trading partner, which accounts for almost half our trade. Many thousands of jobs on both sides of the channel rely on that trade. This is a sensitive time for the most complex negotiations for a generation. Businesses need clarity, especially about what will happen at our borders. They need to know what our long-term trade will look like, especially in key 21st-century sectors such as pharmaceuticals, advanced manufacturing and the service sector. They also need clarity on what transition or implementation will look like.

Honesty and transparency are needed, but let us look at the Opposition's offer. They say that they want to negotiate a customs union with the EU, but the Leader of the Opposition stood up in Coventry and said that he wanted to negotiate exemptions in relation to privatisation, competition and state aid rules. The week after that, I was in Brussels. Not a single country that has a customs union with the EU has an exemption for state aid rules. Even Turkey has to comply with all state aid and competition rules, in accordance with the EU treaties and/or EU laws. When I was in Brussels, time and again I asked politicians from other EU countries whether they would give the UK preferred access to the single market and a customs union with the EU but also allow us an exemption from state aid rules. Time and again, those politicians looked at me and rolled their eyes. The Opposition's position is not honest or achievable, and I believe it is deeply misleading.

In trade negotiations, the devil is in the detail. The Prime Minister's speech was very welcome. It moved us on with a huge amount of detail, and I especially welcomed the detail about the aviation sector, the tech sector, the science and innovation pact—boy, do we need to continue co-operation on science and innovation—and security.

I want to focus on three areas. On services, UK sales to the EU in services are 40% of our trade. The sector has grown as a percentage of our trade in nearly every year. In today's modern economy, we cannot separate goods and services. My mobile phone, for example, feels like a good, but its contents are all services. If a cancer scanner is sold in Europe, it is sold with a maintenance contract—a service. I am about to buy a new car, and it will come with a financial lease arrangement—a financial service. Walking away with no deal on services is not a good deal. It is especially not good for financial services. Some 2,000 people in my constituency work in insurance, but many hundreds of thousands of German savers have bought life insurance products from British companies. Both sides need a deal that covers services.

On borders and the customs union, while we need an agreement about what happens at our borders, there is much more to the customs union and negotiations than

[Vicky Ford]

just tariffs. In particular, we need to resolve the country of origin rules for complex manufactured products. The British car sector employs about 169,000 people directly and nearly 1 million indirectly. Many of the cars it produces contain components from all over the EU. Under WTO rules, those cars are not European enough to be European cars or British enough to be British cars. They would become orphan cars, if I may put it like that, and not eligible under any of our trade agreements with the EU or elsewhere. That is why it is particularly helpful that the Prime Minister has left open the negotiations on not just a customs agreement, but a customs partnership, which is an offer for us to mirror EU customs codes at our borders.

My third point, which is really important, is about transition. The transition period needs to be agreed now, because otherwise real issues will arise for people who work in the City and with goods. On the back of my mobile phone is a CE mark. Every product put on the market in Europe has one, and anything that is imported to the UK needs a CE mark. The mark is offered with a 12-month certificate. If a mobile phone is imported into the UK from elsewhere in the world, it will need a certificate that is valid past not just the end of this March, but the end of next March. Unless we resolve transition this month, what happens to CE marks on goods placed on the market here and elsewhere in Europe will not be resolved. There are not enough notified bodies elsewhere in Europe to take the place of the British notified bodies today.

I am grateful to the Government for getting us to the negotiating point to date, for achieving the deal in December and for the great moves forward and detail in the Prime Minister's speech a couple of weeks ago. Let us resolve the transition period by the end of the month—that is crucial—and let us not lose sight of the devil in the detail of the negotiations ahead. The Leader of the Opposition's position is not achievable, and we need to focus on finding deals that are.

5.58 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Nothing I have seen since the referendum has convinced me that the plan for the UK to leave to EU is anything short of an act of national lunacy. The chaos that we are seeing now—whether over the intractable problems with the Irish border, or over the Government's unwillingness to put anything on trade and customs issues to a vote in the House—just adds further to that impression.

Part of the problem is the Prime Minister's inability to stand up to her Brexit extremists. Their letter demanding a hard Brexit had the added effect of reminding her that they have enough names to force a Tory leadership election. For me, that is what this business has been all about right from the start. David Cameron agreed to a referendum because he had failed to stand up to UKIP, so he dumped the Tory party's Euro-divisions on the rest of the country. Then, as now, it was party before country. But I do not include all Conservative Members in that assessment, as I know that many share my concerns about the crazy rush to a hard Brexit because they know the catastrophic financial and economic effects that it would bring. They must make a stand and not allow their side of the House to be dominated by

the minority of European Research Group fanatics who currently make all the running, and I pay tribute to those who have had the courage to do so. My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) floated the interesting suggestion that there should be a free vote on the final deal—that is quite an intriguing proposition.

Just as I do not believe that there is a majority in the House for a hard Brexit—a nasty Brexit—nor do I believe that such a majority exists in the country. We know that 48.5% of those who voted did not want any Brexit, and I cannot believe that every one of the 51.5% who voted leave did so to make the country worse off as a result of a harsh and nasty Brexit—and make us worse off it will, as every single one of the Government's own sectoral and regional analyses demonstrates. The very least we must be aiming for is a customs union, as my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), who has led the debate for the Opposition with methodical thoughtfulness and a case based on evidence, has long argued.

On the other side we have no evidence, only vague promises that everything will be just fine post Brexit and that we will simply be able to trade freely with the rest of the world. It is like promising a five-year-old rainbows and unicorns. In his speech just two weeks ago, the Secretary of State for International Trade talked vaguely about exploiting “opportunities of the future”, without really laying out what that meant. At the same time, the Government pin all their hopes on a free trade deal with Trump's America—the same regime that has sought trade conflict with us in the automotive and aerospace sectors, and now in the steel sector.

There is abundant evidence from industry to contradict the Government's position. We heard from Ralf Speth of Jaguar Land Rover, who said that without a customs union, JLR would be hit with additional annual costs of £1.1 billion from profits of £1.4 billion. We see PSA raising the spectre of doubt about the future of the Vauxhall plant in Ellesmere Port, which is next door to my constituency. Although I welcome the new investment by Toyota, including in the Deeside engine plant that is also next door to my constituency, the basic fact is that such investment decisions are made two to three years in advance. That decision was already made before the Brexit negotiations. I am more concerned about the words of warning from the Japanese ambassador, after his meeting with the Prime Minister, about Japanese companies having to reassess their investment in a UK without easy access to Europe.

Similarly in aerospace, Airbus needs certainty over a customs union. Flights come in and out of Chester airport several times a day, carrying parts to and from Hamburg and Toulouse. Without sensible customs arrangements, the company's brilliant, efficient, multinational manufacturing process would be impossible. Aerospace and aviation companies also need regulatory certainty—and quickly. Again, we are already approaching the cliff edge because of long lead times. I have heard Conservative Members making the absurd suggestion that we should simply align ourselves for regulatory purposes with the United States Federal Aviation Administration, which demonstrates that, for those hard-line Brexiteers, this is all about ideology and lining up with a right-wing, Trumpist America, rather than doing what is right and best for British industry, jobs and skills.

I finish with a point that was touched on by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) regarding our relations with Russia. I am clear that I welcome the Prime Minister's strong words today on Russia. We must be tough in standing up to Putin's bullying, but we have to ask why Putin is attacking the UK at this time. There might be some domestic reasons, but he does seem focused on the situation here. He has already meddled in the EU referendum, and I expect more details of that to emerge in the coming months, but he knows that by isolating ourselves from the EU—from our allies who share our values and oppose his—we are weaker than we were.

I strongly support NATO and Britain's active membership of that great alliance, but the EU is also an alliance of security. When it comes to economic as opposed to—God forbid—military conflict against an aggressor, we should be seeking the support of our allies in the EU. Now is not the time to be walking away and going it alone when we are faced with Russia's threats. I hope that hon. Members might, in quieter moments, take the time to consider whether, in the light of Putin's latest aggression and his meddling in our democracy, we need to reassess this whole Brexit mess as something that is not currently in the UK's national interests. Putin's tactics are to sow chaos through doubt, discord, confusion and disharmony. Surely even from the point of view of Brexit extremists, all of a sudden there is a greater threat to the UK and the west than the European Union—I hope that they wake up to it.

6.4 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) made a very considered speech in which he laid out in some detail the damage that Brexit will do. I do not intend to go over that ground. Rather, I want to talk specifically about the Scottish Government's continuity Bill. It is important that the House understands precisely what the Scottish Government are doing in relation to Brexit and why they are doing it.

Before I do so, I want to comment on two things that were said earlier. First, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who is no longer in his place, spoke about the continuity Bill in Scotland being subject to many amendments. Indeed it is—147 or so wrecking amendments from the Tories. I simply say gently to the Tories from Scotland that it would have been better if they had signed up to amendments to the UK's EU withdrawal Bill as a bloc rather than tabling all those wrecking amendments to the Scottish legislation.

Secondly, the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) spoke about trade liberalisation—and I agree with him. At the moment, however, an American company, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle company, is telling us that Donald Trump's tariff regime will add \$30 million to its cost base. If his Administration are prepared to damage all-American businesses, it is naive in the extreme to assume that some kind of good deal will be cut for the UK.

Ross Thomson: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman agrees about trade liberalisation. Does he not agree, therefore, that as the EU is the most protectionist organisation there is, with high tariffs on imports coming into it, we will be better off out of it, so that we can help lead the world in liberalising trade?

Stewart Hosie: I know the Scottish branch of the Tory party does not like expert opinion, but the pre-Brexit Treasury leak estimates a loss of up to 10% of GDP, the post-Brexit analysis estimates an almost similar amount, and the Scottish assessment estimates a comparable amount. We are faced with a catastrophe in every circumstance, not only if we go to WTO rules. Better, I think, to fix the problem, to maximise trade, to try to stay within the customs union, and to accept the free movement of people, than to talk about unicorns and rainbows—the Brexiteers favourite slogan.

The Scottish Government's continuity Bill prepares Scottish devolved laws for the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. It means that the EU laws currently in force will be retained after withdrawal and that the Scottish Government will be given the tools needed to make sure that our laws keep working after withdrawal. It is a devolved version of the UK Government's EU withdrawal Bill. I want the House to understand that the Scottish Government have not rejected out of hand the UK Government's proposals. Their preference is to rely on the UK's EU withdrawal Bill. But the Scottish and Welsh Governments continue to seek an agreement with the UK that would allow the necessary consent to be given. In this scenario, the Scottish Government would seek to withdraw the continuity Bill. However, the continuity Bill has to be introduced now, and it is going through the Scottish Parliament now, so that if legislative consent is not given, Scotland's laws will still continue to work properly. That explanation is rather different from the uber-Unionist "wrecking" version that we heard from the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk.

This is important because under the UK Government's proposed way of preparing for the EU withdrawal Bill, they acknowledge that it requires the consent of the Scottish Parliament to become law. Right now, though, neither the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government, nor, on a unanimous cross-party basis, the Scottish Parliament's Finance and Constitution Committee agree that consent should be given. That is extremely important because, as they say, the Bill allows the UK Government to take control of devolved powers without the agreement of the Scottish Parliament. That is why both the Scottish and Welsh Governments have called it a power grab. The all-party Finance and Constitution Committee has said that it is "incompatible" with the devolution settlement in Scotland. The UK Government's proposed changes to the EU withdrawal Bill do not yet address that. They would retain the UK Government's ability to change the limits of devolution without the agreement of the Scottish Parliament. That is important.

In that way, the Scottish Government's measures differ greatly from the UK Government Bill. The main difference is that the Scottish continuity Bill gives the Scottish Parliament its full role in the preparation of Scotland's devolved laws for EU withdrawal. It gives the Scottish Parliament an enhanced role in scrutinising proposals for changes to laws as a result of withdrawal and makes some different policy choices, including retaining in law the EU charter of fundamental rights. It also contains a power to keep pace with EU law, for good reason, where appropriate, after the UK chooses to leave the EU.

Paul Masterton: The Opposition amendments to the Scottish Government's Bill significantly water down the massive power grab attempt by Scottish Ministers in relation to continuing alignment with the EU, which I think the Scottish Government want for five years, then five years, then five years. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those amendments to the Bill are a welcome defeat of the Scottish Government?

Stewart Hosie: When Conservatives talk about a power grab in Holyrood, it is code for defending all powers coming to London. I suspect that lots of Tories would settle for direct rule of Scotland and the abolition or dismantling of devolution completely. I am not going to fall into the trap of the hon. Gentleman's trick question.

The question is: why are the Scottish Government introducing this legislation now? The truth is that Scotland's laws must simply be prepared for the day the UK leaves the EU. If we did nothing, laws about matters such as agricultural support or food standards may fall away entirely. Many others would stop working in the way they were intended. That is important.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Hosie: No, I have given way twice, and there are no extra minutes left.

As my hon. Friends said earlier, we accept in principle that there may be a need for UK-wide frameworks on some matters. It is true that the Scottish and Welsh Governments have been working with the UK to investigate those issues and explore how those frameworks would work. However, it is vital to recognise and respect the way that devolution works. If it is not reserved, it is devolved. If it would normally fall under the remit of the Scottish Parliament and is currently in Europe, it must be put into the devolved institutions now. Should a UK-wide framework and joint working be required, let the UK, the Scottish, the Welsh and indeed the Northern Ireland Governments negotiate that framework.

What we simply cannot have is a power grab where the powers that the UK Government are not certain about are taken back to London, and they then decide in a very patronising way what, if anything, might be devolved in the future. It is completely unacceptable for the UK Government to rip up the devolved settlement. That, in a sense, is the consequence of the power grab.

On Thursday 8 March, the UK Government said that they had drawn up a new list of powers, including ones they say are reserved, that had not previously been shared or discussed with the Scottish or Welsh Governments. A year down the line of these negotiations, a new list is drawn up. We have agreed that the list should be published for the sake of transparency, but we certainly do not agree to the list.

John Lamont: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Hosie: No, I am not going to give way again.

The Scottish Government are being asked to sign away the Scottish Parliament's powers with no idea how UK-wide frameworks will work, how they will be governed and how we will go from them being temporary restrictions the UK Government want to agreeing longer-term solutions.

Despite the UK Government's promise, they failed to bring forward an amendment in the House of Commons to the flawed clause 11 of the withdrawal Bill. Those measures are going through the Lords, but of course, that does not allow proper debate in this place. However, a new amendment—the one that has been proposed—would still allow the UK Government to restrict the Scottish Parliament's powers unilaterally through an order made in this place, and it could be done without requiring the consent of either the Scottish Parliament or the Scottish Government.

If Brexit is itself, as I believe, an unmitigated disaster, its implementation—because it has not been thought through, and there is no plan—is threatening devolution entirely. There is a lack of understanding and respect for the idea that if a power is not reserved, it is devolved. I therefore ask the Minister to return to the respect agenda: if a power is not reserved, devolve it now. The Government should stop the power grab and get on with negotiating properly with the devolved Administrations, so that the UK withdrawal Bill can actually work without threatening the powers of the other nations within the UK.

6.15 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): On 23 June 2016, the people of this country voted to leave, as did a majority of my constituents. The result was won on a narrow margin, but the result was clear, which is why I voted to trigger article 50. However, when we triggered article 50, I argued that we needed a Brexit deal that reflected the narrow margin and would bring leave and remain voters together. That is why I argued then, as I am arguing now, for an EEA-based Brexit. I will say a little more about that later.

Barely a year after that referendum, the Prime Minister called an election in which she hoped to secure a mandate for a hard Brexit, but the British people said no, so the Prime Minister saw her majority disappear. Any sensible Government would at that point have accepted and committed themselves to a sensible Brexit—one that could bridge the divide—recognising that compromises must be made if we are to secure a mutually beneficial deal from this process.

As Michel Barnier's famous escalator slide makes clear, the Prime Minister's red lines leave us with little choice but a Canada-based free trade arrangement. However, a Canada-based deal is about as much use as a chocolate teapot: it fails to cover services, which account for 80% of the British economy; it does nothing to resolve the issues regarding our relationship with EU agencies, just under half of which have no provision whatsoever for third-party country participation; and it leads inexorably to a hard border in Ireland.

I am sure that the Government toadies and Brextremists on the Back Benches are going to repeat ad nauseam the Prime Minister's line about a bespoke deal, saying that all deals involve cherry-picking and so on. To do so, fundamentally misunderstands not only this process, but that of all trade negotiations, because the fact is that all trade deals are a blend of off-the-shelf and bespoke elements. The Brexit negotiations are, first, about deciding on the foundations, and the foundations have to be based on a basic template, whether an EEA, FTA or association model. Once we have agreement on the foundations, we can then move on to an argument about the doors, windows and roof of the house.

It is clear that the fundamental problem with the Government's approach to these negotiations has been an inability to accept that we must agree such a foundational model or template as the basis for the negotiations. It is absolutely unforgivable that, just over a week from the EU agreeing the guidelines for the future relationship phase of our negotiations, the Government are still talking about all the things that they might do—rather blue sky, vague and sufficiently inoffensive things so as not to alienate any wing of the Conservative party. That is a profound abdication of duty and responsibility on the part of the Government, because it has left a vacuum and allowed the EU to define our destiny for us.

Ever since the referendum, we have been on the back foot because the Government have utterly failed to define the terms of the debate. That leads us, inexorably and ultimately—I hope—towards the conclusion that we need an exit on the basis of an EEA-EFTA deal. A Brexit on an EEA-EFTA basis—with a customs union provision building on the protocol 10 precedent, or seeking something deeper—could provide the overarching framework for a deal that is not only achievable, but desirable for both leave and remain voters.

Moreover, an EEA-based Brexit could navigate a path around the Government's red lines, because the EEA is not the same as the single market and must not be conflated with it. The EEA is an internal market covering much, but not all, of the single market and three of the four EFTA states. The EEA excludes fisheries and agriculture, but the key point is that the EEA is predicated on a fundamentally different legal and political purpose to that of the single market. While the EU single market is predicated on the treaty of the European Union, with its aim of "ever closer union", the EEA internal market is based on the EEA agreement, the purpose of which is

"to promote a continuous and balanced strengthening of trade and economic relations between the contracting parties".

The fact is that the EEA is, in essence, a reversion to the European Community, based on the terms of the Single European Act 1986.

Moreover, articles 112 and 113 of the EEA agreement allow for the reform of any of the four freedoms, including the free movement of people. That has, in fact, already been done: the protocol 15 precedent enshrines a quota-based system in Lichtenstein, and it would have been available to the Swiss had they voted to join the EEA back in 1992. It would, therefore, be a lever at our disposal should we wish to join the EEA.

The EEA meets another red line, namely that of ending the jurisdiction of the ECJ. The EEA is overseen by the EFTA arbitration court, which, with UK membership, would have a plurality of UK judges. The EFTA court regularly rules in a different manner from the ECJ and frequently sets precedents that are later followed by the ECJ.

In the EEA, this House would be wholly sovereign. We would see an end to direct effect, and through the right of reservation we would possess a veto on EEA rules. What is more, EEA members have considerable rule-shaping powers through the various committees of the EU, and retain an influence on the EU position at the WTO, at which the UK possesses our own seat at the table.

Vicky Ford: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case about the EEA and EFTA, although it is unfortunate that he described the Canada deal as a chocolate teapot, because it did give free trade in chocolate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. This is meant to be a quick intervention—

Vicky Ford: Quickly—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There is no "quickly" about it, because you will need to explain to the Front Benchers when I cut their contributions down to eight minutes each. It is an intervention, not a speech. I call Stephen Kinnock.

Stephen Kinnock: In short, if we are looking for a common-sense Brexit that strikes a pragmatic balance between prosperity and sovereignty, the EEA is the only game in town. It will allow maximum access to the single market, with the ability to reform free movement, resolve the Northern Ireland issue, end the jurisdiction of the ECJ and, above all, reunite our deeply divided country.

Vicky Ford: The problem with the EEA is that we would have to cut and paste all EU rules, especially on key sectors such as financial services. Would it not be better to fight for a bespoke deal?

Stephen Kinnock: As I have said, it has to be a blend of a template and a bespoke deal. The Government have fundamentally failed to understand that, first of all, these negotiations must create common ground—a territory based on models and templates that are familiar to both sides at the negotiating table. Of course, things can then be tweaked and finessed, but the basic model of the EEA gives us the architecture and certainty for which the country is so desperately crying out. That approach would also have put the British Government on the front foot, rather than leaving a vacuum into which the EU has been obliged to step.

The referendum exposed many of the deep divisions that have existed in our country for many years—divisions between young and old, town and city, graduate and non-graduate. Those divisions came together as we coalesced behind "tribe remain" or "tribe leave". We must not allow the tribalism of the referendum to define our destiny. We must come together. We must find a way to reunite this country, find compromise between remain and leave, and place that compromise at the heart of our negotiating strategy. In the EEA-EFTA model, we have the answer to protecting market access, jobs and opportunities; to a frictionless border in Northern Ireland; and to the call to take back control on immigration, in our courts and in this place. Let us come together, reunite Britain and build an EEA-based Brexit.

6.24 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): I want to raise two areas of European affairs this afternoon.

The first is the potential impact of Brexit on the north-east of England. Some 60% of north-east trade is with the EU and 50% of the cars manufactured in the north-east are exported to the EU. Nissan employs about 7,000 people and more than 30,000 jobs through the supply chain. I have never been one to say that, for example, after Brexit the Nissan plant will close, but I

[Phil Wilson]

am concerned about future investment in the plant. As the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee said in its report on the impact of Brexit on the automotive sector:

“It is difficult to see how it would make economic sense for multinational volume manufacturers—the bulk of the UK automotive sector—to base production in the UK in a no deal or WTO tariff scenario. The shift of manufacturing to countries within the customs union and single market will be inevitable.”

The cost to UK jobs could be in the hundreds of thousands and to inward investment in the hundreds of millions of pounds. That is another example of why many of us on the Labour Benches call on the UK to remain a member of the single market and the customs union. The same report made it explicit that the UK cannot expect an expansion of trade overseas to outweigh the loss of trade to Europe arising from a hard Brexit. It seems senseless to me to walk away from one half of the north-east's trade without a strategic means of replacing it other than through wishful thinking.

The impact assessments the Government tried to keep to themselves reveal the potential impact on the north-east. They identify that three of the major sectors to be hit by Brexit will be the automotive, chemical and pharmaceutical sectors—all major industries in the north-east of England. The impact assessments determine that of all the regions and nations of the UK, the north-east of England will be the worst hit. This is due to the region's strong manufacturing and industrial base, which would be exposed most to the changes and trade barriers, and because we have the greatest dependence on exports as a proportion of the regional economy.

The impact assessments say that the north-east would see a decline in its GDP by as much as 16% over 15 years. We can talk about a new customs arrangement, frictionless borders and non-divergence as much as we like, but all we will end up doing is reinventing the wheel only to discover it will not be as round as the original. It is no surprise that the north-east of England chamber of commerce issued a statement following the spring statement. Ross Smith, director of policy for the chamber, said:

“the success or otherwise of negotiations and planning for Brexit could yet render these forecasts largely irrelevant and business still have little detail to base their planning on”.

The second issue, of great strategic importance not only to the UK but Europe, is our response to Russia's flouting of basic international law and the international rules-based systems by which the community of nations should abide. I do not think we should doubt that Russia's intent with the continent of Europe is to divide and rule. Putin wants a weak Europe. Brexit, I believe, plays straight into his hands. Russia wants to see Europe divided, introspective and prepared, ultimately, to play the international game by his and Russia's rule.

Bully-boy tactics are always the result of the weak. The Russian state is weak, economically no larger than Italy. Its population is ageing. Its military strength may be perceived to be great, but it lacks depth.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and colleague from the north-east for giving way. I just wanted to point out that, although the north-east voted substantially to leave, it shares his concerns about manufacturing, jobs and security.

Phil Wilson: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. She is right. I think there is a shift in opinion now—that Brexit could damage job prospects for tens of thousands of people in the north-east of England.

Putin does not want kinetic action with NATO, but he does want us weakened, distracted and inward looking. That is why the warfare that Russia wants to adopt is hybrid. It can be social, anti-democratic and economic warfare—trying, for example, to influence democratic elections. From funding populist movements, such as Marine Le Pen's Front National, now called National Rally, is it any wonder Nigel Farage sees Putin as one of his favourite leaders? I endorse the Prime Minister's actions today, but the Salisbury incident is about more than just spies.

The use of a chemical weapon on the streets of a city of the UK is also an attack on the principles by which we stand and they must be defended. Members of all parties in the House must declare on which side they stand. This is about defending our way of life, which is internationally protected by a rules-based order that we need to preserve and that Russia seeks to undermine—from its indiscriminate military action in Syria, to the Ukraine and Crimea, to the boosting of its enhanced nuclear capabilities, to a failing economy run by oligarchs who use London as their plaything and to the troll farms of St Petersburg, which spread news of a dubious nature throughout Europe and the US. Russia is trying to shake our confidence in our way of life. Engage and beware, yes, but to give it the benefit of the doubt is ridiculous. It is trying to undermine liberal democracy in the west—the special relationship with the US, NATO, the UN and, dare I say it, with the EU. Those bilateral or multilateral institutions have served us well for decades.

I say to the Minister that our leaving the EU helps Putin. Putin has always resented what he sees as the belittling of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He wants to return to a world where Russia helped to call the shots. It cannot do that now, so the next best thing is to weaken those who are sitting at the table. It interfered in the US election. It welcomes the Catalan independence movement. It supports the Front National in France. It welcomes the extreme stance of Hungary's Prime Minister and the AFD in Germany. Then, of course, there is Brexit.

Putin believes that the east has disintegrated since the Berlin wall came down. Now it is the turn of the west and he will play any game, hold any card and roll any dice to ensure that happens. Eventually, the UK, one of the most principled critics of Russia in Europe, will not have a seat at the table in the EU. That is good for Putin. Of course, we will continue to engage with the EU, but it is better to have a seat at the table than not.

Let us not forget that NATO is a military alliance, and the EU, not NATO, has the ability to impose sanctions against Russia. I agree with the findings of the Foreign Affairs Committee's “Global Britain” report: the Prime Minister needs to come to the House to lay out what a “global Britain” actually means. Now is the time to defend ourselves as a country proportionately and offer a rallying cry for what we believe in as a country. We may have created difficulties for ourselves, but our stance today is the right one on Russia, because the whole argument comes down to values. I see myself as a real Labour man who, in the mould of Clem Attlee and Ernie Bevin, is prepared to make the difficult decisions. I think today is the time to make them.

I believe in Britain as a force for good in the world. We on both sides of the House need to stand up for the principles that underpin our way of life—democracy, human rights and the rule of law. These have been the foundations of the west for decades. We need now to stand against the forces, at home and abroad, that seek to undermine those principles.

6.32 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) gave a compelling exposition of what we have and the benefits that we enjoy within the single market and the customs union, and what we stand to lose from being outside them. I again urge the UK Government to have genuine, not token, engagement with the devolved Administrations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) pointed out why it is absolutely vital for the Scottish Parliament to bring through a continuity Bill to protect the laws of Scotland. He also highlighted the naivety over trade with the US—the hope, and the “rainbows and unicorns” that the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) spoke about—and again urged the UK Government, as I will, to engage meaningfully with the devolved Administrations. It can still be done, even at this late date.

Everybody is getting a bit frustrated by the idea that a bespoke agreement is going to be magically produced here. There is a “hit it and hope” attitude from Government Front Benchers, completely ignoring the realities of the modern world. The UK Government tell us that all will be well, and we are supposed to take it on trust that that is the case, yet through this entire process to date, they have sought to exclude Parliament. They have had to be forced to share impact assessments. They have not listened to or respected the position of the devolved Governments. In this place, we still do not have answers even about the process, never mind what the impacts will be.

As the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) mentioned, there will be a vote, but that vote in itself is a bit like Brexit: it is shrouded in confusion. How much time will there be between the publication of the final agreements and a vote in this place? Nobody knows. Will Committees be able to take evidence and publish reports on the final agreements? Nobody knows. How long will there be between the vote and exit day? Nobody knows. What additional documentation will the Government publish to accompany the agreement and declaration? Nobody knows. There are lines and lines and lines of things that to date nobody knows about this process. It is yet another Brexit boorach.

We do not have answers to these questions on the parliamentary process, never mind answers to the key questions being asked by business and constituents. That is why the Scottish Government have introduced the continuity Bill and why everyone in the Scottish Parliament, apart from the Tories, understands the need for it. It retains in domestic law the EU law currently operating in devolved areas. *[Interruption.]* Scottish Conservatives can chunter from their Benches, but it is clear that they are not standing up for Scotland. The Bill gives Scottish Ministers the powers needed to ensure that devolved law continues to operate effectively after

the UK withdrawal, and that is a very important point, given the range of powers that so far have not been agreed to be devolved directly. These powers should go straight back to the Scottish Parliament. Just today, an Ipsos MORI poll showed that the Scottish people are unconvinced by the UK Government's position. One in eight people in Scotland think it will damage the economy. Only one in seven think there will be any benefit.

What do we know about the economy and trade? The analysis by the *Financial Times* that my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife mentioned suggested that Brexit was already costing the economy £18 billion a year, or £350 million per week, as he pointed out. That is not money on the side of a bus; it is money thrown under a bus—lost to us completely. The London School of Economics estimates that Brexit has already cost the average household £404 a year as a result of the fall in sterling and the higher inflation since the vote. The UK Government's own leaked impact assessment confirms that under all scenarios the UK will be worse off after leaving the EU and that the UK could be forced to borrow £120 billion more after Brexit between 2019 and 2033.

Leaving the EU customs union and single market would be disastrous for Scotland's trading position. It will create barriers to trade, such as EU tariffs, customs checks, rules of origin and divergent regulatory regimes, and could impede Scottish trade with the rest of the world, as we stand to lose the benefit of 36 EU free trade agreements covering 53 markets. When the UK Government talk about trading with nations outside the EU, they should remember that those very agreements have been facilitated by our being in the EU. So there are many benefits to lose. For the food and drink sector in Scotland, we know that a hard Brexit risks access to Scotland's biggest overseas regional food and drink export market; it risks Scottish competitiveness and increased costs for business; it risks the value and reputation of Scottish produce; and it substantially risks food production through the loss of our workforce.

We know that there is no trade without transport and that maintaining and improving physical access to European countries and allowing transport operators and service providers registered in the UK to operate across the EU, and vice versa, remains a vital component of trade. Minimising administrative arrangements for crossing borders for international freight and logistics is vital, as is access to labour. They are crucial for our transport network.

If I had more time, I would talk about what will happen to rural Scotland or the energy market if we do not get a meaningful deal, but I will finish by saying that so far we do not know what will happen about Parliament's role. We know that the continuity Bill is a much-needed piece of legislation to protect the interests of the Scottish people and their devolution settlement. We know that the protections businesses seek and the questions they still have remain unanswered by the UK Government. We know the impacts and concerns for our economy and trade. Similarly, we know the impacts and concerns for the food and drink sector, health and social care, transport, rural Scotland and our energy market and tourism, among much more. We do not need more rhetoric from the Government about “scaremongering”. These are genuine, real concerns, and we need answers.

[Drew Hendry]

Will the Minister answer the questions about the parliamentary process, so that we can do our job of representing our constituents and ensure that there is a transparent and open process? Will he recognise that the Scottish Government are being asked to sign away the Scottish Parliament's powers with no idea how UK-wide frameworks will work, how they will be governed and how we will proceed from the temporary restrictions that the UK want to agreeing longer-term solutions? In doing so, will he accept that this is not a constructive way in which to engage with the devolved Governments?

6.40 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Saturday is St Patrick's day. Although we do not know where St Patrick was actually from, we know that he was not Irish. Captured as a slave by the pirates who roamed the Irish sea at the time, he was not entirely welcome when he returned as a free man, although he might find himself quite popular at Twickenham on Saturday.

The *Bristol Post* recently published an article about the Bristol merchants who, under Henry II, went to Dublin in 1171 to defend Dublin castle against the insurgency in Ireland. As a reward from Henry, they were able to establish trading posts. There is still some debate about whether the merchants still have citizenship in Dublin, or whether the arrangement has been overridden by the 1937 Irish constitution. That is something that I still intend to discuss with the Irish Government.

Because time is short, I will skip through the centuries that lie between then and now, during which people have flowed across these islands, mostly in times of conflict and often in times of great poverty and desperation, looking for work and trying to settle in various areas. A hundred years ago, we were the same country. My grandparents were born under the auspices of this Parliament in Mayo and Cavan, joining John Redmond's followers in the British Army during the first world war.

Upstairs in the House this week, there has been an exhibition of pictures by Bernard Canavan depicting the flow of migrant labour after the second world war. Last week, in one of the Committee Rooms, there was the most amazing discussion and presentation by the former Taoiseach John Bruton and the historian Dermot Meleady about John Redmond and the battles that were waged in the House. That was at the invitation of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), and it was a truly magnificent evening.

This weekend London will have three days of celebration for St Patrick's day, which is a far cry from my experience as a child growing up in London. We had very small parades, which were hidden away on a Sunday morning, viewed with great suspicion, and heavily policed. There was no welcome parade on the streets of London. My first experience of crossing the Irish border was in 1985, when I was only 21. It was a shocking, horrendous experience, which I will not go into now, but over the intervening 30 years I have witnessed a phenomenal transformation of that experience.

I urge the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the Prime Minister to visit parts of the border now, to understand exactly what is at stake.

The Good Friday Belfast agreement was not just about Northern Ireland, and it was not just about Ireland. It was not about a border. It is about the freedom of movement of people across these islands and the deep roots that we have. It is also incredibly important to the Irish community who are settled here, and have seen the experience of being Irish in this country transformed over the last 30 years. The normalisation of relations was hard fought for, and we need to preserve it. For the first time, we have an international treaty between our countries based on mutual respect and shared interest after those centuries of conflict. It is an exemplar across the world.

The verdict of the House of Lords on the border was that there was

"a distinction between identifying solutions that are theoretically possible and applying them to a 300-mile border with hundreds of formal and informal crossings, and the existence of which is politically divisive. Any physical infrastructure at the border would be politically contentious and, in the view of the PSNI, a security risk."

Paragraph 47 of the December agreement talked about a "mapping exercise". I have asked before in this place and in writing to the Prime Minister for that mapping exercise to be published.

We need to end the façade that there can be any kind of different customs and alignment regimes across these islands, or any unilateral change to the current provisions. From St Patrick and the Bristol merchants' wanderings to the billions of pounds traded and movements made across these islands now, the great people of these islands expect to be able to move and trade freely, and any dilution of that will not be acceptable to any of us.

6.45 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the outstanding and thought-provoking speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth); I am very glad that I was in the Chamber to hear it. At the start of my speech, may I send our best wishes to the Minister, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who is about to embark upon the most challenging and rewarding experience of his life? It is not Brexit; he is due to have a baby—on Friday, I believe—and the thoughts of us all are with him.

This has been an interesting afternoon of speeches—not so much a debate as a collection of MPs' thoughts on all matters Brexit-related. Excellent though the contributions have been, it seems to me that we have just taken part in what is known as displacement activity—the parliamentary equivalent of scratching one's head when confused. Why is there no opportunity for the House to express its view in a vote? Because the Government are afraid of this Parliament and their own party.

I have now served in Parliament opposite three Governments. While none of them has been any good, obviously, none has lacked confidence like this one. As my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) said, the Tory party is utterly riven in government by the task that will define it. How we leave the European Union is the single most important question this generation of MPs is ever likely to face, yet the Government have to be forced to give us a meaningful vote on it.

There is one issue that exposes the miserable inadequacy of the Government's leadership more than anything else: the Irish border. The Government have no clue

about how to ensure that we have a frictionless open border in Ireland, and it is an outrage that our Prime Minister says that she is looking at the example of the border between the United States and Canada. That is one of the worst examples I can think of, so will the Minister confirm that the Prime Minister has finished looking at that particular example and ruled it out? I do hope so.

When will the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union visit the Irish border? I understand he has never been, but that is unacceptable. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South, with her excellent knowledge of all things Irish, and I would be happy to take him. The hard Brexiteers have no suggestions about how to resolve this issue; they only have red lines and outrage of epic proportions directed at anyone who dares to suggest a sensible way forward. Where is the Government's legal text of the phase 1 agreement? The EU published its on 28 February; where is ours? The Labour party thinks we should remain in a customs union with the European Union, and there is wide support for that in industry, particularly among manufacturers. That would safeguard jobs, help to resolve the Irish border and give certainty, but the Government have rejected this option because they are buffeted by hot air from their own Back Benchers, not because they are putting the national interest first.

The Government should listen to the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) when she talks of the importance of services and non-tariff barriers. They should listen, too, when the former top civil servant at the Department for International Trade says that we are rejecting a three-course meal for a packet of crisps. He has a point, but rather than engaging in debate, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) goes around telling him to try a couple of multipacks.

We are just over a year from exit and the Government have so little to say on important issues. Precisely which areas do the Government want to diverge on and deregulate? What do the Government intend that the transitional period will look like? Will the European Court of Justice have jurisdiction, and on what? How will the Government ensure that there is an open border in Ireland without a customs union? Where is the immigration Bill; why is it delayed? When will the trade and customs Bills return to the House? As my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) said, the Government are afraid of the House because they know that there is a majority in it for a customs union.

Labour's approach would be much clearer. We respect the referendum result and accept that Britain is leaving the European Union. My constituency, like that of my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgfield (Phil Wilson), voted to leave, but we understand that our constituents did not vote to be poorer or less safe. Remaining in a customs union makes people safe, and they know that we are putting their jobs first. They understand why the Labour party takes its position.

Unlike some others, we want a close relationship with the EU based on our values of internationalism, solidarity and equality, and on maintaining rights, standards and protections. We would seek a deal that gives full access to European markets and maintains the benefits of the single market and the customs union, holding the Government to what the Brexit Secretary promised in

the House of Commons, with no new impediments to trade. We would negotiate a new UK-EU customs union, so that there would be no tariffs with Europe and no hard border in Northern Ireland. We would seek to negotiate having a say on the terms of any new EU trade deal.

Labour does not believe that deals with the USA or China, both of which have weaker standards and regulations, would compensate for a significant loss of trade with our trading neighbours in the EU. Nor do we believe that being part of a customs union with the EU would prevent us from trading extensively with non-EU countries. Germany's largest trading partner is China. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, the idea that being in a customs union prevents us from trading globally is nonsense. We will never accept our NHS or any other public services being part of any trade deal with Trump's America. As my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) said, just look at what he intends for our steel industry. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) said, Labour believes that powers over devolved policy areas currently exercised by the EU should go directly to the relevant devolved body unless the UK Government can make a compelling case for that power to be held at Westminster.

In all these areas, the Labour party has set out an approach to the negotiations that is pragmatic, that respects the referendum result and that puts the national interest first. How long will it be before the Government do the same? As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) said, how long will it be until the Government start to work to reunite our country? How many days of general debate do they think we need before they dare to present Parliament with an actual decision? The Government have limped along for long enough, and it is time they stopped listening to noisy bluster and pulled themselves together to secure a good deal for Britain.

6.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I thank the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) for her kind words at the start of her speech. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade Policy said in his opening remarks, this is a timely debate. We are approaching a crucial moment, and we must negotiate our exit from the EU while building a new and lasting relationship with it. We are ambitious about what can be achieved, as the Prime Minister set out in her Mansion House speech, and the UK is seeking the broadest and deepest possible agreement. We are making real progress. At the end of last year, we agreed key elements of our withdrawal, and we are in the process of turning that agreement into a draft legal text. This work has gone well in recent weeks, and in many areas, such as the financial settlement and codifying the chapter of the joint report on citizens' rights, negotiations are progressing positively.

On Northern Ireland, on which the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) spoke so well, the UK Government remain steadfast in their commitment to the Belfast agreement, to avoiding a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and to avoiding any borders within our United Kingdom. We are working intensively to achieve our immediate goal of agreeing a

[Mr Robin Walker]

strictly time-limited implementation period by the March European Council. Both the UK and the EU have published texts on the approach to the implementation period in the withdrawal agreement, and there is significant common ground between the two sides. Some issues remain to be discussed further, however.

We have put forward practical solutions that will help to deliver a smooth exit and protect both UK and EU interests during the implementation period. An example would be the use of a joint committee to resolve any issues that arise during that period, including in relation to any new EU laws. We look forward to continuing discussions with the EU and remain confident that we will reach an agreement by the March European Council next week. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) pointed out, that is absolutely vital. Over the coming weeks and months, the UK and the EU will continue to push ahead with negotiations in all areas, with the aim of reaching a complete withdrawal agreement in October.

The Prime Minister has set out an ambitious vision for the future economic partnership that the UK is seeking with the EU. We want the broadest and deepest agreement that covers more sectors and establishes greater co-operation than any pre-existing free trade agreement. I noted the comments of right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee, that the EU has a long track record of such bespoke agreements with key partners. We have specific proposals across our economy, including in goods, services, agri-food and fisheries, and I assure my hon. Friends the Members for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) and for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) that we will be leaving the common fisheries policy when we leave the EU.

Five foundations must underpin our future trading relationship: reciprocal commitments to ensure fair and open competition that is built on trust in one another's institutions; an independent arbitration mechanism; an ongoing dialogue with the EU, especially between regulators; an arrangement for data protection that goes beyond an adequacy agreement—my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) made that point well—and, finally and importantly, the maintenance of links between our people. A fundamental principle in our negotiating strategy for goods is that trade at the EU-UK border should be as frictionless as possible, so we are seeking a comprehensive system of mutual recognition to ensure that, as now, products need to undergo only one series of approvals in one country. That can be achieved via a commitment to ensure that the relevant UK regulatory standards remain as high as the EU's, which will mean in practice that UK and EU standards remain substantially similar in future.

Our default position is that UK law may not necessarily be identical to EU law, but it should achieve the same outcomes. In some cases, the Parliament of the day could choose to pass an identical law. It could also decide not to achieve the same outcomes as EU law, but it would do so knowing that there would be consequences for market access. As I set out at Which? today, at the launch of its consumer charter, the UK has always played a key role in setting high standards for consumer rights, and we will continue to do so as we leave the EU.

My hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury and for Chelmsford made powerful cases about the importance of trade in services, and we want an agreement that is broader than any agreed before. We do not want to discriminate against EU service providers in the UK and would not want the EU to discriminate against UK providers. That will mean, for example, limiting any new barriers to prevent firms from establishing and agreeing an appropriate labour mobility framework that enables firms and self-employed professionals to provide cross-border services, either face to face, on the phone or through the internet. We will of course also want to continue to recognise the qualifications of each other's professionals. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) spoke so passionately about the importance of financial services to his constituency, I can assure him that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor spoke in their recent speeches of the importance of reaching an arrangement for that sector, and I fully agree.

After we have left the EU, the UK will push for the greater liberalisation of global services markets. Trade in services represents around 20% of the value of world trade, but it accounts for 45% of the value of UK exports in 2016. Services are an important and growing component of supply chains, and digital technology is continuing to make more services tradeable.

In the Prime Minister's Mansion House speech, which the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) described as serious and detailed and the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee described as frank, she accepted that access to each other's markets will in certain ways be less than it is now. We understand that we cannot have all the benefits of membership of the single market without all its obligations, but we seek a new balance between those benefits and obligations.

As the Prime Minister has made clear, we will be leaving the customs union. A customs union has a single external border that sets out identical tariffs for trade with the rest of the world. As international trade policy is an exclusive competence of the EU, remaining in the customs union would restrict our ability to set our own independent trade policy, and the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) described such a scenario as "deeply unattractive" and explained that a situation in which the EU could make us subject to third-country trade deals would be a disaster. By leaving the EU customs union and establishing a new and ambitious customs arrangement with the EU, we will be able to set our own independent tariff arrangements and forge new trade relationships with our partners around the world.

On security, which the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee and many other Opposition Members raised, we seek a deep and comprehensive security partnership with the EU. Our commitment to Europe's security should be absolutely non-negotiable. As the Prime Minister said in her Mansion House speech, the job now is to get on with delivering the best outcome for the UK's exit from the European Union, and that is what we are determined to do.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Mike Freer.)

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Banking in North Ayrshire

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

6.59 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to have secured this debate on banking in North Ayrshire, although I really wish it was not necessary. I should apologise in advance for my croaky voice as I struggle through this speech. I have been trying to secure this debate since November, when the closures of RBS branches in Kilwinning, Kilbirnie and Saltcoats were first announced. I have the fortune, or misfortune, to have secured this debate on the very week when I have lost my voice—make of that what you will.

Since November, I have spoken in three debates on bank closures, written several letters to Ross McEwan, the chief executive of RBS, and raised this matter with the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee, which has summoned the chief executive of RBS. I have also held street stalls with SNP local councillors, activists and volunteers on countless Saturdays in the affected towns since Christmas, collecting signatures for a parliamentary petition protesting against these closures, which I will be presenting in this place in the coming weeks.

The reason for all this activity is the real anger and betrayal felt by the people of Kilwinning, Saltcoats and Kilbirnie at the loss of these banks in their towns. RBS is a bank that they own via the Government—a bank bailed out from its own mistakes and mismanagement by their taxes. Now this same bank is leaving these communities without a backward glance or any sense of social responsibility towards the very communities on whose taxes the bank's very continued existence relied.

Although many communities in Scotland will be left without a bank following the latest announcement of closures, in my own constituency what has happened brings the total number of towns with no bank to a staggering six. The towns of Dalry, Stevenston, West Kilbride, Ardrossan and Beith no longer have a bank; should the latest round of closures go ahead, we can add Kilwinning to that list. Kilwinning will be a town of over 16,000 people with no banking facilities—it would be funny if it were not so appalling and ridiculous. I honestly do not think any other constituency in the UK has been so adversely, cruelly hit. Indeed, the banks are stampeding out of Ayrshire at an alarming—a staggering—rate.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I salute my hon. Friend's courage in getting through the debate. Does she agree that rural areas are particularly badly hit by bank closures? I am thinking of those in North East Fife, where RBS closed all but one, leaving a huge commute for those who need banking services the most.

Patricia Gibson: I do. I will come later to the fact that no cognisance has been shown of the consequences for communities that the banks are supposed to serve.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her timely debate about the whole issue of banks, which affects not only Ayrshire but the whole country. There is a trend for banks to make closures, particularly in countryside areas. People are

left to their own devices, with no way of getting money, their giro cheques or other services. This is a national issue. This is the thank you that the public get for bailing the banks out in the first place.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman has put his finger on the real source of the anger: people's sense of abandonment and being left to their own devices with no other facilities on which to rely, despite the fact that the bank exists because the taxpayer made sure that it did.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate and thank her for giving us a chance to participate in a small way. Given that banking is increasingly moving online, it is hard for urban and rural communities that are geographically isolated from physical banks if they are also limited by the provision of broadband services. Does the hon. Lady feel that that issue should be clearly considered before any proposed bank closures take place?

Patricia Gibson: Indeed. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, which go to the heart of the issue of financial inclusion, social exclusion and digital exclusion. These things have to be worked out together in some kind of organised fashion.

At one point in its history, RBS championed vowing not to close the last bank in town, but now it is twisting itself into all sorts of shapes to dissociate itself from that promise. I suppose the PR men for RBS found the appeal of that vow attractive, but now it seems that RBS is embarrassed by it and is no longer holding to it. We have heard a little tonight about banking online. We hear about this a lot, and I accept, as we all do, that many people now choose to bank online. There is no dispute about that. If it suits the lifestyle and needs of those who choose to bank online, good luck to them, but many do not bank online, for a variety of reasons. As the hon. Gentleman said, many choose not to do so because they are digitally excluded; this is a choice that they are not able to make.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The hon. Lady raised a very interesting point, because there is an issue with broadband, particularly in the countryside. A lot of people have problems with BT and broadband, and that denies people the opportunity to go online, if they so wish.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about that. The banks talk about online banking as though it is a choice, but for many people it is not a choice, as they are digitally excluded. Many people may not be digitally excluded but may simply decide that online banking is not for them, for whatever reason. For the record, I put myself in that category, as I choose not to bank online. The point is that it should be up to the customer to choose how and when they bank, and it is not up to the banks to make that decision for us. But what we have now is a situation where the banks have decided, most cynically, that those of us who have chosen not to bank online must be herded into that particular pen, despite our will.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate and commend my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on the way she is strongly presenting her argument.

[Neil Gray]

Will she comment on the strength of feeling in North Ayrshire about the footfall figures that have been released—or have not been released—by RBS on the branches there? There is certainly a feeling in Airdrie, where RBS is trying to close one of my local branches, that it has not provided sufficient or accurate information on the justification for those closures, which is very concerning.

Patricia Gibson: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct about that. We all know, as we have all seen in our own constituencies, the jiggery-pokery that has taken place in the presentation of these figures, which do not reveal—[*Interruption.*] I am hoping that this is the first time “jiggery-pokery” will appear in *Hansard*.

Mr Speaker: I have heard the term used previously by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg).

Patricia Gibson: Thank you for that clarification, Mr Speaker. We do know that there has been jiggery-pokery and all sorts of nefarious goings on as to how these figures are presented. [HON. MEMBERS: “Sleekit.”] My colleagues are shouting the word “sleekit” to me, which may well indeed cover the particular practice that is going on. The point is that it is not right for customers to be herded into the pen of online banking, a place where they have up to this point chosen not to go or have been unable to go. We are being forced down this road by banks as they shut up shop. If we insist that we do not want to bank online, the attitude we see from too many banks, including in conversations I have had with banking officials, who shall remain nameless, is that they collectively shrug their shoulders and more or less say, “Suit yourselves, but we are still shutting your bank.”

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady on several counts. I thank her for securing the debate, for the good work that she and her fellow councillors have done in her constituency to hold RBS to account and for using the word “jookery-pawkie”—the “jiggery-pokery” that I can understand.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) Has that been in *Hansard*? [*Laughter.*]

Bill Grant: I am left-handed and I am from a different party as well. Will the hon. Lady join me in expressing dismay that none of the 10 banks that was given that reprieve was from Ayrshire? Indeed, the 10-month reprieve is simply a stay of execution and it is derisory for the people of Scotland. RBS could do better for the people, who have been customers for generations. It was a world leader and it has let down the people who made it.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman is right that giving 10 banks a reprieve is not enough, and I am of course disappointed that none of them is in Ayrshire. I wish the banks that have been reprieved well, but I wish that we could add to that list the other 52 in Scotland that are earmarked for closure. If we could give a reprieve to the banks in my constituency, I am sure that

we would make every effort thereafter to persuade RBS that the reprieve should be permanent. Obviously, the goal would be to save every bank, but I shall come back to that later because the Minister is looking at me with a bit of alarm.

I would throw one question out there in respect of digital exclusion. The banks are fond of telling us that we do not need to have branches and that we can bank online. I would particularly like to know what RBS's advice would be to digitally excluded customers. Where do they go when the last RBS in their town closes? How do they access banking services?

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. RBS likes to talk about the mobile vans that are going around, one of which comes into the rural part of my constituency of Dundee West. They often stay for a very short period; they have steps to get in, so those who are infirm or disabled cannot get in; and when it is raining people often have to stand waiting for half an hour to get service, so get soaked to the skin. Does my hon. Friend agree that the people who are digitally excluded are the very people who come for that essential service?

Patricia Gibson: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. RBS has informed me that in my constituency, North Ayrshire and Arran, it will replace the branches in Kilwinning, Saltcoats and Kilbirnie with mobile banks. That is completely unsatisfactory. The mobile banks are delayed by the weather and by traffic and they are not disability compliant. Apparently, the advice is that if someone is disabled, immobile or has a mobility impairment and cannot access the mobile bank, the banking teller will come out and they can do their banking in the middle of the street. Well, that's okay, then! It is absolutely shocking.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an extremely passionate speech. The all-party group on disability, which I chair, is going to launch an inquiry into community banking for people with disabilities and mobility problems. My constituents who have mobility problems and live in Strathaven and Lesmahagow, where RBS plans to close the banks, feel particularly let down. They feel that no appropriate services will be available.

Patricia Gibson: Indeed; I shall come in a little while to the importance of providing accessible and sustainable banking services in all our communities and for the needs of all our communities, including for those of us who cannot get to the next town because of lack of our own transport or of public transport, or because of other mobility issues.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): My hon. Friend has spoken about the impact of bank closures in rural areas, but does she agree that they also have a real impact on small businesses on the high street in outlying village areas of a cities, such as Juniper Green in my constituency, where the Royal Bank of Scotland shut its branch last year? If the auto-teller is taken away, people will drive to the supermarket to get their cash out and spend their money there, rather than in the many vibrant small businesses that exist in places such as Juniper Green in Edinburgh.

Patricia Gibson: My hon. and learned Friend leads me smoothly to my next point, although of course we are not just concerned about rural areas—Kilwinning could hardly be called a rural area, by any stretch of the imagination. Her point about the effect on small businesses is extremely important, because we all know that small businesses, which are the backbone of our communities—the lifeblood of our communities, keeping the heart of our high streets beating—work in an extremely challenging retail climate. If local businesses cannot bank their takings at the end of the business day, they incur additional insurance costs. They can either take their cash home with them at the end of the business day—because if the bank goes, there is no night safe—or they drive to the next town to bank their takings. Either way, their insurance costs go up. With businesses already struggling on the edge of survival, that could well be enough to tip several of them over the edge. For that reason, the support of banks in our towns often proves critical for small businesses. Let us not forget that, regardless of their political views, everyone in this Chamber understands the importance of small businesses to keeping our high streets alive.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I welcome this Adjournment debate because three banks are shutting down in my constituency in Chryston, Bellshill and Tannochside. Tannochside has one local bank, built by the community. When those banks opened, it was local workers who built them, and the hon. Lady is spot on about local businesses. The staff of small businesses usually have to take large sums of money, and if the alternative is to go to the post office, post offices are not equipped to take them. This is a very good subject for debate and I thank the hon. Lady for introducing it.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I now need to make some progress, because I know that the Minister is keen to respond.

As for those living in the towns affected by the closures, Kilbirnie customers have been advised that the nearest RBS following the closure of their branch is in Largs, a round trip of 18.8 miles; Saltcoats customers have been directed to Irvine, a round trip of 12.8 miles; and Kilwinning customers have also been directed to Irvine, a round trip of 6.8 miles. That is simply not good enough when one considers that many of those customers do not have access to private transport. They will be at the mercy of local public transport in all weathers. So the elderly and infirm will be left to fend for themselves as financial and social exclusion—that is what we are talking about—bites in their towns. The bank closures will mean that the affected communities no longer have access to day-to-day essential banking services. We have heard about the problems of mobile banks. They are not a solution to the problem of the closure of the last bank in town. They are a poor substitute and the people of Kilwinning, Saltcoats and Kilbirnie expect and deserve better.

Banks have shown, and are showing increasingly, that they have no sense of service to our communities. Tonight, I call on the Minister to establish and enforce a guaranteed minimum level of service provision for essential banking services, recognising the importance of continued access to banking for our communities. Surely, it is now

time, given that banks are riding roughshod over our communities with no sense of service or responsibility, for a guaranteed minimum level of service provision for essential banking services to be put in place.

I know that the Prime Minister has said repeatedly that branch closures are operational matters for the banks, but that is not good enough. RBS is still almost 73% owned by the taxpayer, so this is a bitter pill to swallow. In addition, the UK Government retain all legislative and regulatory powers in respect of financial services, so the UK Government have the authority to call a halt to this devastating round of closures while banks, stakeholders and the UK and Scottish Governments consider how best to take account of the obligation to banking customers and our communities. Whatever the banks may say, they have an obligation to our communities—a service obligation, a financial obligation and a moral obligation.

The UK Government argue that these are “operational decisions” for banks, but there is a precedent, as the Minister knows, and George Osborne, the former Chancellor, let the cat out of the bag. He confirmed that during his time as Chancellor his consent was sought by RBS about the departure of the former chief executive officer, Stephen Hester. The UK Government could right now reject any RBS branch closures unless and until impact assessments have been carried out, and should require RBS to ensure that practical and sustainable alternative banking services are put in place before any closures are signed off.

It really is time to call on RBS management to reverse these planned closures. The Minister tonight has a responsibility to demonstrate that the UK Government are standing up for our communities on this most important issue. The SNP Westminster leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), has persuaded RBS to reprieve 10 branches across Scotland until impact assessments have been carried out. I wish those communities well, but it does nothing to soften the hammer blow for the towns in my constituency that face losing their banks and for Kilwinning in particular which will lose its last bank branch. In the past, the Minister has suggested that customers who are not happy can move their accounts to another bank. What does he suggest that the people of Kilwinning do, when there is no bank for them to move to within a reasonable distance?

Of course customers are also advised to move their accounts to the post office. Well, 10 years ago I recall collecting petition signatures to save post offices in my constituency when swathes of them were being closed down in my constituency under a previous Government. Post offices bolted on to the back of the local Spar simply do not provide the range of services or privacy that customers need and deserve.

I appeal in good faith to the Minister to ensure that these closures are halted—that RBS is ordered to halt these closures and carry out full impact assessments on the communities affected. All the communities affected want nothing less, and the people in the towns of Kilwinning, Kilbirnie and Saltcoats deserve nothing less. Is the Minister going to stand with RBS management, or is he going to stand with the communities affected and the communities of Kilwinning, Kilbirnie and Saltcoats in particular? I urge him to do the right thing and stand up for our communities.

7.20 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I sincerely commend the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this debate. She has once again spoken very powerfully on behalf of her constituents, and I know that she is passionate about this issue. The RBS executives will note that there are more than 20 Members of Parliament here and that a number have spoken. They will also want to reflect on the views that have been expressed.

Since becoming Economic Secretary on 9 January, I have had the privilege of responding to a number of debates on the closures of bank branches across the UK and in specific local areas. In each, I have heard important stories about what the local bank branch can mean to the community, as I have heard again this evening. It means a great deal in terms of practical access to services. I will return to that point in more detail. Banks can also be at the heart of how people feel about their local high street and the future of their community. Putting my Treasury responsibilities aside, I visited a bank in my constituency that is facing closure in exactly the same way that the hon. Lady set out. I had to sit down with the bank manager and go through the same sorts of arguments, but these are commercial decisions. I will say a little bit more about that.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: No, I am not going to give way because I have only eight and a half minutes, and I want to do justice to all the points that have been raised.

This Government are very aware of the issues. I will talk about the challenges facing the banking sector and our communities. I think that the hon. Lady has said in a previous debate that she does not bank online, and that is her choice, but whatever our personal preferences, banking is going through a period of unprecedented technological change and consumer behaviour is changing significantly. Banks are having to adapt to those shifting patterns of behaviour. The decisions that they are making are sometimes not popular and I understand why, but the hon. Lady will be well aware that those decisions are not for the Government.

The hon. Lady made a point about the former Chancellor, the former Member for Tatton, signing off on the chief executive post. There is a big difference between signing off on strategic leadership and getting involved in day-to-day commercial decisions.

Brendan O'Hara: Will the Minister give way?

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: I am not going to give way; I am just going to continue.

Each bank's branch strategy, including whether to open or close individual branches, is for the management of that bank to determine. I understand that that is frustrating. It is frustrating to all of us who face this issue. The Government rightly do not intervene in these commercial decisions, nor do the Government manage

the RBS Group. RBS is headed by its own board, which is responsible for strategic direction and management decisions. All businesses strive to deliver for their customers, but they also need to be able to plan for the future and to make changes where they are needed. These are complex commercial decisions. RBS has made its decisions in line with its commercial strategy.

Stephen Gethins: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: No, I will not.

The hon. Lady and her colleagues are entitled to ask questions, as they have done very effectively this evening, and to press RBS on its rationale. Although I do not agree that the Government should or could cancel RBS's decisions, I am certain that the hon. Lady's views, expressed here again this evening on behalf of her constituents, will have been heard by RBS.

I turn to the Government's role with respect to the Post Office. The hon. Lady has previously said that the Government have "not lifted a finger" to help. I beg to differ. The Government are taking action, and I welcome the opportunity to reiterate that. For those who still need or want to bank in person, we have helped to expand and improve face-to-face banking services at the Post Office. There are 11,600 post office branches in the UK, 24 of them in the hon. Lady's constituency. There is a post office in each of the three towns that she mentioned—Kilwinning, Kilbirnie, and Saltcoats. Indeed, across the UK, 99% of personal customers and 95% of business customers can do their day-to-day banking at the post office.

In response to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who was concerned about—

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) *rose*—

John Glen: I am going to response to the points raised. I have five minutes.

On the concern about small businesses and cash lodgements, RBS offers cash courier services, while the post office can accept up to £2,000 without prior notice, and further arrangements can be made on a case-by-case basis. As the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran has mentioned previously, this might not be a service that people are yet fully familiar with, but I believe that it offers a valuable alternative and that people are adjusting to the reality of what can be obtained from a post office. It is important that the people who can benefit from these services know about them, so I will keep pushing the banks and the Post Office to do more to raise awareness of the expanded services that they jointly offer. It is important that they make this case proactively and publicly. We should spread the message far and wide. We can all do our day-to-day banking at the post office. We in this House can help to reassure people who may be worried about this issue.

On the oversight of banks, where they do decide to close branches, the Government's ongoing support for the industry's access to banking standard is making a real difference. All the major high street banks have signed up to the standard, which commits banks to a number of outcomes when a branch closes: first, that

they will give at least three months' notice—I think that RBS, certainly in some cases, has given six months' notice—secondly, that they will consider what services can still be provided locally and communicate clearly with customers about alternative ways to bank; and thirdly, that they will ensure that there is support available for customers who need extra help to bank online or to access services at the local post office.

The standard is not just a list of outcomes—it has teeth, because the Lending Standards Board monitors and enforces it. It is actively monitoring how RBS Group and other banks fulfil their obligations to their customers when branches close. It has a range of tools and sanctions at its disposal should a bank fall short. I know that it is very open to talking to Members on behalf of their communities, and I encourage the hon. Lady—

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: No.

I encourage the hon. Lady—and her colleagues—to talk to the board if she has concerns about the steps that RBS is taking, or not taking, in her constituency. The access to banking standard is the practical way to shape a bank's approach to local areas. I encourage all Members in all parts of the House to ensure that their community is aware and able to engage with the bank directly.

Several Members have mentioned access to cash. The Government continue to work with industry to ensure the provision of widespread free access to cash. In

December, LINK, the organisation that runs the ATM network in the UK, committed to protecting all free-to-use ATMs that are 1 km or more away from the next or nearest free-to-use ATM. This is a welcome strengthening of its financial inclusion programme, and one that I hope will reassure members across the House.

The hon. Lady fights hard for her constituents in North Ayrshire, as do a number of other Members who have spoken, and I am sure that their concerns have been heard. We all understand the frustration and disappointment caused by bank closures, but these are not Government decisions. The Government's policy remains clear: RBS is responsible for these decisions, and RBS must defend them.

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way on that point?

John Glen: No.

Banking is changing rapidly—we cannot deny that reality—but the Government believe that banks must support communities across the UK when their local branches close. That is a dialogue that we are all deeply engaged with in trying to find the best solution for communities. In this place, we can help to draw attention to these issues and work constructively to help our constituents to access the services they need. For my part, I will keep pushing for everyone to be able to access the banking services they need, wherever they live.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 14 March 2018

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

Foster Care

[*Relevant document: First Report of the Education Committee, Fostering, HC 340.*]

9.30 am

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered foster care.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. This subject is very dear to my heart, as I shall explain. The life chances of children in care—they are also referred to as looked-after children—are significantly lower than those of other children. That applies to their prospects of getting well-paid employment, their educational achievement and the chances of them being involved in the criminal justice system. Foster care is where 75% of children in care are looked after, so supporting foster-carers is essential to ensuring the best possible outcomes—the best life chances—for the majority of children in care. Ensuring that foster care is as positive an experience as possible, maximising its benefits and minimising its risks and downsides, and ensuring the best outcomes for looked-after children, must be a priority for anyone who is interested and for everyone in a position of authority with responsibility, be that in national Government or in local government.

The outcomes for looked-after children show just what a contrast there is. Let me take educational achievement at year 11. The Minister will be all too well aware of these figures. Some 18% of looked-after children achieved A* to C grades in English and maths, and 14% achieved five or more A* to C grades, including English and maths. The figures for children as a whole are 59% and 53%, so looked-after children's achievement is something like one quarter to one third of other children's. That on its own tells a story.

Children in care are around five times more likely than other children to find themselves convicted of an offence between the ages of 10 and 17. Former looked-after children have difficulty establishing and holding down good relationships later in life, many of them have mental health difficulties that continue right through their lives, and many find themselves with housing difficulties or homeless. In 2015, 39% of care leavers were not in education, employment or training. That figure is far too high for comfort. Given those figures, it is essential that we ensure that children in care and those who care for them receive the best possible support, so that as much as possible can be done to improve outcomes.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate on such an important topic. Although he is absolutely right to highlight those statistics, does he agree that we should also praise the work that foster-carers themselves do in seeking to provide a caring and loving environment, particularly when children's services are under such pressure across the UK because of austerity?

Bill Esterson: My hon. Friend makes his point extremely well. I know many foster-carers, and I am sure that other Members here do too. The vast majority do exactly as he said: they provide an extremely supportive, loving and caring environment. They do their best to deliver the kinds of outcomes he mentioned, in the face of great difficulty, due, as he said, to the cuts forced upon local government. I have nothing but the highest regard for foster-carers and the work they do.

I know from personal experience—as many Members know, I have two adopted children—that when someone adopts, they are effectively a foster-carer for the period until the adoption goes through, with all the same rights, responsibilities, restrictions and interventions from the local authority and social workers that other foster-carers have. I know just how challenging that can be. During that period and since, I have met many foster-carers and seen just what a good job they do. I am glad that my hon. Friend made that point. The question is how we ensure that foster-carers continue to get support, not least given the scale of the cuts. I shall develop that point.

One of the challenges is delivering permanence for young people in care to ensure that they receive a long-term settled placement that is right for them. The Government have placed enormous importance on children being adopted. As I said, I have two adopted children. It was decided that that was the best outcome for them. They have siblings who were not adopted, and for the vast majority of children who go into care, that is not the way forward. Foster care is often a long-term option. It is really important—there are many dear old friends in the Chamber with whom I have debated this over the years—that we see adoption, fostering, residential care or kinship care not as better, but as the right outcome for the individual child. It is incredibly important to restate that.

One of the challenges right now is ensuring that we do not lose sight of putting the individual child first. My hon. Friend mentioned austerity. We have seen cuts in early intervention of 55% since 2010. It is predicted that there will be a £2 billion shortfall in the children's services budget by 2020. The number of children on child protection plans has risen by 83% since 2010. Social workers' case loads are rising. Local authorities have reduced the number of social workers they employ directly and have become more reliant on agency workers, who are more expensive. Although budgets have fallen, spending on children's services has actually increased, which means that money has been taken from elsewhere, including early intervention. Many in child protection, in children's services more widely and in local government, say that we are at crisis point in terms of both the social impact and the economic situation.

Yesterday, I was with someone from Northamptonshire County Council who is responsible for children's services. He has been told that he cannot spend on discretionary services at all, so he will not be able to increase the number of social workers. What does that mean for foster-carers? It means that when a child comes to live with a foster-carer, there is no prospect of money for clothes or anything other than the weekly allowance, not just in Northamptonshire but everywhere. Foster-carers therefore have to pay for absolutely everything, whether new clothes for a new arrival, a holiday or any kind of additional support for the children.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I should declare my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on holding this unfashionable but important debate. He will be aware that funding of children's services has increased, albeit in very challenging circumstances—particularly now—but there are huge differentials between experiences with different authorities. As a study by the all-party parliamentary group for children found, in one authority 166 children per 10,000 will be taken into care and, at the other end, at another authority the figure is 22 for every 10,000 children. There are similar big differentials for referrals to children's services, child protection plans and so on. To what does he attribute the huge difference in experiences of vulnerable children in different authorities? It is not just based on funding pressures.

Bill Esterson: That is probably more of a question for the Minister. The hon. Gentleman said that funding had gone up. It is true that spending has gone up, but funding from central Government for local authorities is significantly down, including in children's services. Some local authorities have seen significant cuts and some have seen very few. That may have something to do with what he says.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I do not want to stop my hon. Friend because he is making some incredibly important points, but there is also a clear issue about cuts to services other than children's services, which are putting greater strain on local authorities. In areas of high deprivation, where all those services are under significant strain, the result is much worse outcomes for children. It is essential to look at the whole picture of what is happening to these children every day in their communities.

Bill Esterson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We cannot ignore the effects of the wider local government and public service spending situation. Numerous organisations who provided briefings for the debate pointed out that if the support is not there for families, it is difficult for local authority children's services departments to act in anything other than a reactive way, intervening only in a crisis. That is an expensive way to operate. If the services, social workers and local foster-carers are not available, outcomes are more expensive. In a demand-led service, a crisis is invariably more expensive and, in the areas of highest deprivation that my hon. Friend mentioned, it is more likely that intervention happens only in such a situation.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend and I were in the same Home for Good seminar, which I chaired yesterday, on this subject. If we put the budget to one side for a minute, does he agree that what emerged from that seminar was an acknowledgment of the inconsistency of social worker support? If the social worker keeps changing and there is not continuity, the social worker will not know the person, their background and their problems and challenges. Is that not the real problem?

Bill Esterson: Absolutely. It is well established that continuity and stability are vital to the long-term wellbeing and life chances of children in care. In foster care, that applies to the carer and also to social workers. One point

made in the briefings is that there has not been continuity between social workers. A child and their foster-family need support from a social worker, but in far too many cases they rarely see one, either because there is not one there or because they keep changing. That is damaging, as my hon. Friend points out.

We have recently had two inquiries—the national fostering stocktake requested by the Government and the inquiry into fostering by the Education Committee—which have made several recommendations. I will not address them all them, but there is evidence—this also emerges from the briefings—that while overall there are enough foster-carers, there are regional disparities. There are also problems in providing foster-carers for some groups, whether those are ethnic minorities, sibling groups, children with special needs or disabled children, so a challenge is how we improve the number of foster-carers who have the specialisms and skills to look after children in those groups.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I apologise for arriving slightly late for the debate. We had a roundtable on faith and fostering yesterday, and I hope to get a chance to contribute on that later. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the challenges is that people of religious backgrounds feel that that is perceived as a barrier to their genuine intention to offer a home for good for children who need it in fostering, and that we need to get over the idea that in some way having a faith is problematic?

Bill Esterson: The answer is that in all cases the consideration must be what is in the best interests of the child. That has been my view for as long as I have looked at this.

Some of the briefings pointed out the need to recruit and retrain better, to deal with the shortages in the areas I touched on. To address that point, the stocktake and the Select Committee both recommended a national register of foster-carers. I also notice that the stocktake suggested that local authorities pool resources. There have been consortiums over many years, which I thought were part of doing just that.

On a national register, one of the challenges is that often needs are local. I think the Government have made the point that it is often desirable for children in care to be relatively close to home—although not in some cases of problems with their birth families—and a national register does not always address that. There are some real tensions around that recommendation.

The stocktake concluded that pay was not an issue. The feedback I have had is that that is totally untrue. Foster-carers have seen their allowances cut. I mentioned that there are not payments for additional support or for when a child arrives, and the money that foster-carers receive is not what it used to be and is under pressure. We must be wary about that and ensure that they are properly remunerated.

As to whether foster-carers should be regarded as professionals, I understand why the stocktake says they should not be—it does not want to take away from the fact that they are there to provide a family environment, and that is quite right. However, we also need to regard them as holding an incredibly highly skilled, professional role. There is a degree of professionalism, and it is

wrong not to recognise foster-carers in that respect. There are, therefore, some tensions around what is being recommended.

The Government have not yet responded to either of the two reports. It is probably a little early to expect the Minister to respond today to all the issues in those reports, but I hope he will reply to some of the points raised in the debate. In reality, only 3% of children are adopted, and 75% of looked-after children are in foster care. The scale of cuts experienced by local government has clearly created challenges in providing the support and resources that are needed to look after children and improve the outcomes I mentioned earlier. Unless there is a step change in our approach, it will become harder to prevent children from entering care in the first place, and harder to provide support that puts families back together when that would be the best outcome for the child.

It is no coincidence that more children are in care than at any time since 1985. If those numbers are to reduce, the Government must intervene to ensure that local authorities, social workers, foster-carers, and everybody who is dedicated to supporting and improving the life chances of children who end up in our care system have the support they need to do the best for those children. Only the Government can take such action—the £2 billion figure is very significant, and I hope that the Minister will listen to Members from across the House who, I suspect, will raise similar points about the need to get this right.

I mentioned both social and economic effects. If it is not possible to do the best by a child, that is disastrous for that child, and also for their birth family, foster-carers, and others involved in their care. There is also, however, an economic cost, and perhaps the Minister—or another Member—will remind us just how expensive it is to provide lifetime support for someone who does not recover from the neglect and abuse that puts them into care in the first place.

I have not mentioned prisons, but a significant proportion of our prison population are people who were in care. We must act and intervene early, not late, if we are to address those concerns and support those children, and it is incredibly important for foster-carers and all those who assist them to have that support.

9.53 am

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Howarth, for allowing me to speak, and I repeat my apology. The late arrival of the Chubb security engineer detained me—unfortunately that is a feature of modern political life.

I want to share some of the findings from a roundtable that I chaired yesterday. It was arranged by the charity Home for Good, and attended by practitioners involved in all aspects of fostering. There were different representatives from different local authorities, including large authorities such as Lancashire County Council, and district councils such as West Berkshire Council. There were other charities that encourage fostering, private foster-caring organisations and—most importantly—some foster-parents.

The focus of the roundtable was the question of faith and fostering because, as I indicated earlier, a myth often abounds that people of faith are debarred from the opportunity to provide foster care. In reality, however,

people often put themselves forward to be foster-carers precisely because of their faith and because their beliefs prompt them to open their home to those in need.

Other myths abound—for example, that it is not possible for a Christian foster-parent to foster a Muslim child. That is patently untrue. A Muslim child may have had an experience in their past that means that they wish precisely not to be fostered within their own religion, or the reverse could be true. As we know, the media have not done fostering a good service by sensationalising a particular case where there was an apparent mismatch between the faith background of the child and that of the family. However, that particular local authority has a good track record of going out of its way to try to provide good matches, and it shows remarkably good faith-literacy in trying to get the right answer for the child, with the child's needs at the centre of that.

Some good points came out of the roundtable, including the need for greater faith-literacy in social work. I think it is increasingly accepted more readily in society that in order to understand different faiths and the differences between them, and the implications of that for the world we live in today, we all need to be more literate about other people's faiths and indeed people of no faith. We must understand those things much better, and we will get better matching if we can do so.

I think we must also go out of our way to reach some minority ethnic potential foster-carer applicants, because in many cases they are even more fearful about the question of faith when it is raised. Tellingly, the director of Home for Good spoke about a “cool wall” that he has in his office, on which he pastes the first thoughts that come to mind among the social workers he interviews regarding people of different faiths. Intrinsically, people have an instinctive set of adjectives that they may apply to one faith or another, and depressingly, right across the piece, on the whole those adjectives were negative. That myth really needs to be dispelled. We are closing our minds to the opportunity presented by people of faith who are prompted to offer help in such a way.

When we were suddenly faced with large numbers of Syrian families who the Prime Minister had pledged to accommodate, there was an outpouring of offers from churches and others who wished to provide homes for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, or for whole Syrian families in order to keep siblings together. Sadly, however, it was difficult to capture the opportunity of that offer, and many of those who came forward to offer their homes temporarily, or for good, found that that was not followed through. In some cases, there was also anecdotal evidence of the view that said, “Well, they should put their names forward to offer their homes first to the existing large numbers of children in care who need a home.” The moment was missed, and I hope we can learn from that.

Mr Sheerman: The right hon. Lady and I both chaired parts of the seminars yesterday. Does she share my concern that, in addition to the very dramatic calls that come out of the Syrian crisis, we need a much better campaign to identify the right sort of people who would be good foster-carers, and ensure that they are networked and trained?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I could not agree more. An important point that came out of the roundtable was that evidence must exist to help to support the fact that

[*Dame Caroline Spelman*]

people of faith who offer their homes for good—for fostering—often prove to have greater “stickability”, and tend to stick with a child through thick and thin until they are launched into the world as an independent adult. I would like that evidence to be brought out in the open. It is collected; we know the data exists. There are data on the religious background of all the children in care, and of the foster-carers who come forward. It is about time that we used that evidence base to bust the myths.

Tim Loughton: My right hon. Friend is making a good point. Interestingly, the crisis point when Syrian refugees came to this country resulted in an increase in the number of families offering themselves as foster-carers or adopters for the long term. On her point about people of faith, we must remember that the Children's Society was the Church of England Children's Society. Barnardo's was built on religious foundations. The important question is which family can offer the best and most appropriate loving home to a child in need of fostering or adoption. The Government had to change the law on adoption because of the prejudice against people who happen not to be of the same cultural or faith background, which excluded children who could have had a perfectly good, stable home with those parents—but it was not allowed. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the question is not one of cultural matching, but one of cultural sensitivity to a child's background?

Dame Caroline Spelman: My hon. Friend, who is very knowledgeable about this matter, makes an extremely valid point. The issue is about opening our minds, removing barriers and preconceptions about why people cannot foster, and looking at the best solution for the child.

I know that there is pressure on time, Mr Howarth, and I do not want to delay the Minister's response to the debate, but I just want to finish by mentioning something by way of a case study. One of the foster-carers present at yesterday's event spoke powerfully about the five children in her care. She is of white Caucasian background and is married to a Jamaican, and they foster some Muslim children, some children of Christian heritage and some of no faith. Things work well in her household, which has proved a good match for those children. I think that challenges all of us to be more open-minded about opportunities to increase the number of foster-carers.

Another important point is that often people of faith are in communities of faith. When parents in a church community, for example, come forward to offer their home as a home for good, there is a tendency for others in that church community to be prompted to think, “Could I do that? If they can, I should be able to.” Before long, two or three families in the communities are fostering. The amazing advantage is that they support each other in the community, and the children feel more comfortable because they find others in their position. I encourage the Minister to help with that aspect, which was missed in the stocktake. Perhaps it is a little unfair to say that the official from the Department for Education who attended the round table pledged to bring the point

back to the Department. I sincerely hope that when, as it will have to, the Department responds to the two reports—this is why the debate is so timely—the point about faith and fostering will not be missed.

10.3 am

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) on securing the debate. As the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, it may not be fashionable, but it is critical. I could not agree more with the sentiments expressed by the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) about the role of faith in fostering. The placement must be right for, and meet the needs of, the child. That means we must pay attention to the things that matter to the children who enter the care system.

I want to begin by asking why so many children are being taken into care in the first place. The Minister will be aware that I worked with children and young people for some time before I entered Parliament. I have never known the situation for children and families in this country to be as desperate as it is currently. We should be deeply concerned about the fact that the number of children in care is, as Barnardo's says, at its highest point since the mid-1980s. The number of children entering the care system has increased every year for nine years. In the first six years of the coalition and Conservative Governments, the number of children subject to a child protection plan went up by 29%. The Minister will be aware that the Association of Directors of Children's Services identified a £2 billion funding gap, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central mentioned, between the demand for children's services and the available resources. Often when I have conversations with social workers they tell me that they are unable to take children into care when they think they need to, because of the resources available. That suggests that the situation is even starker than the figures lead us to understand.

The ADCS is clear about the reasons for what is happening. It has laid the blame squarely at the door of the coalition austerity policies that have continued under the present Government. It has blamed long delays for universal credit, and I recognise that issue from my constituency, which was a pilot area. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham shakes his head, but I spent Friday sitting with representatives of charities, primary school teachers, police and clergy in one of the poorest areas of my constituency, and some of those people were in tears because in 19 years of working with children in that community they have never known a situation so bad: it is to do with policies such as the two-child limit on benefits and the housing benefit cuts. In my area in particular the bedroom tax has been devastating. We never had the smaller properties, but we had big family homes; they were built on purpose because they were better for families. We placed families in them, and suddenly told them, “You can't pay your rent, and it is your own fault.” The impact on those families has been devastating. There is usually nowhere to move to apart from the private rented sector, and we do not have a huge private rented sector, so many people are stuck in their accommodation accruing arrears and worrying every day how they will pay the bills and feed their children.

The situation has an impact on the profession, too. There are currently 5,540 child and family social work vacancies. That means that 13% of the children's social work workforce is missing. Is it any wonder, then, that there are issues of continuity of care and support for children, as my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) has mentioned? During the time in question, support outside children's services has been stripped away; 600 youth centres have closed in four years; there has been a huge loss of Sure Start and children's centres across the country. The upshot is stark. As the ADCS found in a report last year, children in the poorest areas are 10 times more likely to be put on a child protection plan or be subject to care proceedings than those in the wealthiest areas. It is an absolute disgrace.

While I sat with frontline workers in my constituency on Friday trying to work through with them how better to support families in crisis, representatives of the secondary school—the academy—were absent. There were police at the meeting to raise concerns about the welfare of particular children. The academy tells me that it has not expelled them, but it has given them managed transfers outside the school—presumably because of the impact of some of the children on results. From 2010 onwards, many of the Members present for the debate have been coming to debates and Select Committees warning Ministers that if the children's service workforce is fragmented—if that family of professionals who used to hang on to children and families in times of crisis is broken up—the result will be what is happening now. We see it in our communities; we see the impact on children.

I want to focus on what happens to children when they go into care. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central has said, there has been a lot of focus on adoption in recent years. I do not criticise the Government at all for wanting to look closely at what happens in adoption, and to make sure that the children for whom it is right get placements quickly—that they do not miss out and find that there are no suitable families to take them. However, as my hon. Friend said, the vast majority of children in the care system are fostered. There was a lot of anxiety, in the years when it seemed that the Government were interested only in adoption services, about the lack of attention being paid to pressing problems in fostering. That is why the fostering stocktake was greeted with such enthusiasm by the sector, but it would be wrong not to explain to the Minister the real sense of anger and frustration about the fostering stocktake and its inability to deliver on the promise it made.

Before I talk a little bit about some of the problems that have emerged with that report, I will say that one area in which it is particularly strong—knowing Martin Narey as I have for many years, I am not surprised by that—is the positive role that care can play in children's lives. He is absolutely right to highlight in the report the fact that it is not primarily the fault of the care system that children often leave care with such poor educational outcomes. My hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central cited the figures on young people from the care system who get into trouble with the law or end up in prison.

In the vast majority of cases, the care system does a tremendous job in supporting and enabling children to go on and live better lives than they would otherwise have done. We cannot expect the care system to compensate

entirely for every single thing that happens to children before they come into care. In fact, to see the most successful examples of children who have left care, we must look to the children themselves, their ambitions and aspirations, and the support we package around that, rather than telling them how to do it.

The concern about the fostering stocktake centres on a number of key areas. There is a real sense that it is dismissive of the shortage of foster-carers and therefore the numbers who are placed outside care. As my hon. Friend rightly said, it is not that there are not enough foster-carers in the country, but that there is not enough spare capacity, so that when a child in one particular area needs a foster-placement that is available in that area. As a consequence, we are still seeing far too many children moved outside their area, stranded a long way from school, family members and friends.

In all the time I worked with children and young people, what stayed with me most was that the thing that sustains them through the hardest time in their life—being taken away from family and forced to confront a whole new life unfolding ahead of them—is relationships. Sustaining those relationships ought to be a primary goal of public policy for these children, because friends and family are their top priority. It cannot be right that, at the moment when they feel they have lost everything, they also lose the trusted aunt, the best friend or the teacher who cared.

The fostering stocktake does not pay anywhere near enough attention to that issue, or to the fact that one third of foster-carers are now being referred to look after children who lack any prior knowledge about them and whose needs are outside their approved scope, as the Fostering Network reminded me this morning. The stocktake does not reflect the real hardship that many foster-carers have to endure in order to care for children. The Minister will be aware of the “State of the Nation's Foster Care” report that the Fostering Network undertakes every two years. The most recent one was published in 2016. Some 2,500 foster-carers were consulted and 42% of them said that their allowances covered the costs. That left 58% of foster-carers who had to dig into their own pockets to cover the full cost of foster care.

To me, that seems to be nonsense. It matters to all of us that we get this right for children. We should not be saying to those children or the people who step up to care for them that they have to suffer hardship to do it. There is an issue with staying put, which the Minister may be aware of; one third of foster-carers who did not continue with placements said it was down to financial hardship. He will know of the huge battle that many of us in this House fought to get that on the agenda. We were led by my right hon. Friend, the late Paul Goggins, who did such tremendous work for children. The former children's Minister, Edward Timpson, rightly took that issue up and said, “We have to do right by these children; we have to make sure they have the same level of stability as we would expect in any other family.” The truth is that it is not working, and the reason is the level of allowances that are paid, or sometimes not paid at all, to those foster-carers.

Mr Sheerman: I agree with almost every word that my hon. Friend says, but what comes out of both reports is the amateur basis on which we have run fostering for a long time. We do not have a national

[Mr Sheerman]

register or a national training system, and getting the balance between fostering as a calling and as a profession has not been addressed.

Lisa Nandy: As always, I have reason to thank my hon. Friend, because he brings me nicely and neatly on to my final concern, which I think is shared by many outside this place, about the fostering stocktake. The sense of professionalism that many foster-carers feel about the work they do is not adequately reflected in the report. I would really like to hear from the Minister a response to the concern that, while foster-carers foster out of compassion, love and a sense of duty to step up and care for some of the most vulnerable children in the country at a moment of crisis, foster-carers' rights and children's rights are pitted against each other in this report.

That is the problem with the report. In all the foster situations that I have had the privilege to witness or deal with over the last 20 years, I can tell the Minister that the needs and the rights of foster-carers and the children they care for go hand in hand. They are integral to each other. I would be grateful if he said something about the professionalism with which foster-carers conduct themselves, and the need for a formal structure around fostering.

What has disappointed me most of all about the fostering stocktake, and about Government policy in recent years, is that the voice of the child does not seem to be present in either. When we talk to children, as the Minister will know, they tell us that stability, security and preserving those relationships are central to them.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Lady makes a very persuasive point. I do not know whether she has read this book, but if colleagues have not done so, I was profoundly moved by reading "My Name is Leon", which was turned into a film. It is told from the perspective of a child aged nine in the system. It certainly altered my understanding of what it feels like for them. The risk aversion that is built into the way we try to get it right for the children can end up causing incredible heartache for the child—the one we are most trying to help.

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. I have read that book. Before I came to this place I worked for the Children's Society, and before that I worked for Centrepiece with young homeless teenagers. Almost on a daily basis, when I worked in those roles, speaking to children and young people surprised me. They said very different things about their own ambitions and aspirations, the way they perceived injustice and what mattered to them from what we had assumed, sitting in an office 200 miles away.

The absence of the child's voice from the fostering stocktake is really quite serious. I would be grateful if the Minister, when he responds to the debate, said something about how the Department is making efforts to ensure that children's voices are heard as the Government responds to the fostering stocktake. In all the time I worked with children and young people, the need for stability and security and to preserve those relationships was at the heart of what they felt mattered.

I will never forget sitting with a nine-year-old child who shook with anger, who did not want to talk to me or anyone in the room about her own experiences. The former Children's Commissioner had set up the meeting with children and young people so they could talk to us about their experiences of care. After a while, the child said, "Well, why should I talk to you? Who are you?" She was right; why should she? She said, "And how long are you sticking around?" I asked her, "Have you had a lot of people in your life?" She had had six social workers in three years.

I say to the Minister that we must take that seriously for children, and one of the reasons we are totally unable to get to grips with it is the austerity policies this Government are pursuing, which are causing havoc in communities such as mine. I appreciate that he is the Minister for Schools—the Minister for Children and Families has to be at the Select Committee on Education and therefore, disappointingly, cannot be here—so this is slightly outside of his natural remit. However, he must see the impact of this on children every day when he talks to teachers and teaching assistants in his own schools. I say to him what one of the teaching assistants said to me on Friday: the biggest threat to family life in this country now is this Government. That has to be taken seriously.

I want to ask the Minister a particular question about stability for children. I am not sure whether he can answer it, but if not, I would appreciate it if he wrote to me. As he knows, there was a Westminster Hall debate before Christmas, in which the Government committed to ensuring that foster-children were covered by the 30-hours childcare pledge. That was extremely welcome, but the then Minister for children was, unfortunately, sacked in the reshuffle a few weeks later. I wrote to his successor, who kindly wrote back and said that the Government were still progressing those plans to ensure that foster-children were covered by the 30-hours pledge. However, his letter caused me some concern, because he wrote that the Government were developing plans to

"allow access to extended entitlement where foster parents are working outside of their fostering responsibilities."

I would really like to know what happens if a child already has the 30-hours entitlement and therefore has a place at a nursery or other childcare setting, then goes into foster care where the foster-carer is not working. If the child were to lose that place as a consequence of going into foster care, it would cause all the damage that is done, as I have explained, when children lose not only their families, but their friends and everything that is familiar to them. I would also be grateful if the Minister clarified whether those plans are developing at sufficient speed, so that families will be able to access them by this September.

I am aware, Mr Howarth, that I have taken up a great deal of time, and I apologise to other Members for doing so, but I feel that this debate, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central, is absolutely central to a group of people in this country who do not have a voice. They do not have the right to vote and they are not normally heard in this place. However, they have every bit of ambition, optimism, energy, creativity and commitment to the future that each of us have—in fact, in my experience, they have more. Sadly, at the moment, we are lacking a plan that matches that. We have to do better.

10.22 am

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I have been moved by some of the significant speeches across this Chamber. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) on securing this important debate and on his excellent speech. I thank him for reflecting on his experience both as a foster-carer and an adopter. As someone who is adopted, I would like to personally say thank you, because the value of adopting is huge and I would not be here today without it.

There are many reasons why a child enters the foster care system—abuse, neglect, abandonment, incarceration and death or illness in the family, to name a few. Sometimes it is just because parents cannot cope. In short, children are placed into care because their family is in crisis. Foster care is intended to be a temporary solution on the path to building a safe and stable family. Children deserve to be raised in a home with kindness, with their needs met and with stability. It is also vital that we recognise and pay tribute to the role played by carers, whether that be in foster care or in care homes, on a professional or part-time basis, purely because they want to do better for children in our society and to provide secure, stable and nurturing homes for those children, without which many children's lives would be a whole lot worse.

I appreciate that this morning's debate is about care in England, but I also want to mention the progress being made in Scotland. Most children do not care which Government are doing best; they just care about being looked after properly, having the same life opportunities and feeling equally appreciated. As we heard, in January, the Education Committee published a report, which stated that there should be a complete root and branch review of the care system in England. The report made a number of recommendations to the Government. For example, foster-carers should be paid at least a national minimum allowance; that is a no-brainer. A national college should be established, working across England to improve working conditions for carers. Foster-carers should be provided with a resource for training support and given a national voice and representation—absolutely. A national recruitment campaign should be launched. There should be a free childcare entitlement for children in foster care. Any decent society would consider those the bare minimum standards.

While the Committee report is wholly focused on England, it also calls on the UK Government to undertake many of the actions that are already happening in Scotland, and highlights and references the work done by the Scottish Government, which I will now expand on. The Scottish National party Scottish Government are working hard to improve the conditions and life prospects for children in the care system. They are currently undertaking an independent root and branch review of the care system, and examining the underpinning legislation, practices, culture and ethos of the care for our young people. It will be driven and shaped by young people themselves. We heard earlier how important it is to hear the voices of young people. The Scottish Government are committed to having a conversation during the next two years with 1,000 people who have experienced care, to inform improvements to the system.

Here are a few of the things we have committed to. First, all young people who have experienced care in Scotland will be entitled to full university bursaries, and

those who fulfil the minimum entry requirements will have a guaranteed place. By 2021, we want looked-after children to be just as likely to be in college, training or a job as other children—quite rightly. In addition, a new improvement programme is to be launched, which will bring together services responsible for looked-after children, young people and care leavers, to test ways to raise the average age at which a young person leaves care. Not only that, but £10 million is being provided to local authorities to ensure that kinship care allowances are raised to the same level as allowances for foster care.

In November 2015, the Scottish Government published their looked-after children and young people strategy, which builds on existing improvements in care and calls on the sector to accelerate progress. The strategy's priorities are to support families early, to prevent children becoming looked after—as we heard, those numbers have sky-rocketed in the last 30 years—to help children to have a safe, secure and nurturing permanent home, and to ensure that every child receives the best care and support.

I am proud to say that in Scotland we are seeing real progress. School exclusions are down and the number in permanent—rather than temporary—placements is up. However, we know that more still needs to be done and we cannot ignore the reality for children in care. Why? Sadly, the statistics are still horrifying and should horrify everyone in this Chamber. Of young people who have been in care, only 6% go to university and almost half will suffer mental health issues. One in two of the adult prison population lived in care when they were growing up—one in two. Lastly—I think this is the most horrific statistic of all—a young person who has been in care is 20 times more likely to be dead by the time they are 25 than a young person who has not. Let us pause for a few seconds to take that in. Many of us will have children or nieces and nephews. All of you have been children yourselves. Think about what is being said.

I would like to put it on record for the first time that I am truly grateful and thankful for the love, care and support that I got from those individuals who allowed me to call them by their first names, as I experienced both foster care and care in a home—Uncle Eddie, Uncle Pete, Aunt Nan and Aunt Lynn. I have to say to Auntie Rhona, who used to look after my hair, well, it didn't work in the long run. I have never spoken about this publicly before, because often it is like an indelible mark, a stain of shame that we keep to ourselves, and that I find it difficult to speak about today, but I am proud to be able to stand here today and not be silent on the matter. I speak for the many thousands out there who are yet to have their voices heard.

I am one of the lucky ones. I know, from someone who has been touch with me over the years, that others have not been so lucky, and fulfil more than half of the shocking statistics I have just outlined. Sadly, as I have said, we carry this dirty little secret. It profoundly affects our relationships at home and with each other outside, our experiences and our life opportunities for the rest of our lives. So it goes without saying that the Education Committee's report is hugely valuable and all its recommendations should be taken on board. An independent, root and branch review is vital to ensure that we get it right for every child across these islands. What is being done in Scotland is a huge step in the right direction. We should not play party politics on this. This is for all of us to get right.

10.29 am

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) for securing this debate. His practical experience and knowledge of fostering made for a formidable opening speech. I pay tribute to all other Members who have contributed, especially the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who it is a pleasure to follow. We are honoured that you shared your story with us today.

Since 2010 we have seen an exponential rise in the number of children coming into care. There are now 72,000—the highest since the 1980s. There is a wealth of evidence that the Government's forced austerity measures are driving that increase. With the stream of referrals coming into children's services departments leading to 90 young people entering the care system in England every single day, the implications for fostering are clear. That is why so many of us were keen to see the long-awaited fostering report, which was first announced in 2016 and released this February. Sadly, for some of us, that keenness quickly waned. Today I will focus on that report.

The report has received more criticism than praise, and is viewed by many as lacking vision about transforming the dire state of fostering in England. It makes assumptions based on opinion, not evidence. It makes a number of unqualified, sweeping generalisations. In my view, our children and foster-carers deserve better.

It is essential that there are enough foster-carers to meet demand. At present, there simply are not. The pitiful pay given to foster-carers, leading to some of them making the painful decision that they cannot continue in that role, coupled with the Education Committee's findings that identified the Government's lack of efforts in the recruitment of new foster-carers, suggest that we are on a trajectory where there will not be enough homes for the children who need them.

Foster-carers are deeply committed to every single child in their care. So it was disappointing to see that the stocktake claims that carers are not routinely underpaid, and that they are paid adequately. That is simply wrong. We know that a quarter of carers receive the equivalent of less than £1.70 an hour, based on a notional 40-hour week, and 90% of our foster-carers do not receive the national living wage. The right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who chairs the Education Committee, summed up its findings by saying that,

"it is clear that too many are not adequately supported, neither financially nor professionally, in the vital work that they do."

Should it not be an embarrassment for the Minister and the Government that they are presiding over a situation where foster-carers, who provide an excellent standard of care day in, day out, report that they are struggling to support not only themselves but the children who are entrusted to their care?

Carers who are struggling are also being offered golden hellos from independent fostering agencies to leave the local authorities they work with. Those agencies then charge local authorities higher rates. The undercutting by independent fostering agencies is a pattern that has been identified by many social workers and the Conservative vice-chair of the Local Government Association. Yet, the review denies the existence of such a practice, claiming

that the reverse is happening—that councils are poaching foster-carers from independent agencies. That bizarre claim is based on nothing other than the authors' perception. I really hope that the Minister will look closely at the regulation of commercial fostering agencies, as the Labour party has.

I, with others, was aghast when I saw in the report a raft of recommendations that would require primary legislative change. The report recommended that carers be given prominence over the day-to-day decisions regarding children in their care—prominence over birth parents, even when the children are in voluntary accommodation. That is at complete odds with the current legislation on parental responsibility and is simply wrong. The report's authors do not seem to realise that there is already provision in legislation to take account of parental disagreement.

A deeply worrying recommendation, based on very little evidence, was also made that local authorities should scrap independent reviewing officers. IROs are a fundamental part of the care system. They were created to protect the rights of vulnerable children in care, to advocate for them and to ensure that their needs are met. Without IROs, a child who is unhappy or—worse—being abused in their placement, could literally have nobody at all to turn to. Imagine being that child, who has been removed from a place of harm into a placement where that harm endures, when there is nobody to tell about it and no escape. I am sure the Minister agrees that removing such safeguards would be at the Government's peril, and that judicial consequences will certainly follow.

In the report there is also a fixation on legal status. It claims that the priority must be to convert more fostering placements into permanent arrangements. Apart from the obvious fact that an emphasis on legal status, rather than a child's individual needs, is at odds with good practice, it completely ignores the availability and benefits of other options, such as long-term foster care. Every single child in the care arena is completely different and has different needs. That is why there are a number of options for care. Decisions should always be made on a child-by-child basis. The cynic in me cannot help think that the authors' predilection for adoption or special guardianship is a cost-cutting exercise. Once permanence in those forms is achieved, the state no longer has a duty towards those children or their carers.

Bill Esterson: I am glad that my hon. Friend raises the point about the cost element of recommending adoption and special guardianship orders rather than long-term fostering. That particularly applies for those aged 18 and above. In my speech I did not mention Staying Put or the fact that the funding for it is lower than for foster care. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a big mistake and a big impediment to ensuring that children who go into foster care are given the long-term permanence of being part of a family?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: It will come as no surprise to my hon. Friend that I completely agree. I am also a keen advocate of extending Staying Put to children in residential care. It cannot be right that there is a two-tier system where some children are treated differently simply because of their placement.

The recommendation is also symptomatic of the Government's obsession with adoption as the gold standard, to the detriment of all other forms of care. We need a consistent, overall strategy for children in care under this current Government. Rather than seeing the holistic picture and attempting to address issues when they first arise, their piecemeal approach has led to separate and unaligned strategies around early intervention, children in need of help or protection, fostering and adoption.

Can the Minister confirm that he will robustly refute those recommendations? I respectfully remind him that full adoption comes with the severance of birth ties. He knows as well as I do that that is not always right for those children in long-term foster care who enjoy continued contact with their birth families throughout placement.

The report deeply disappointed again when it came to contact. It stated that the well-established presumption in favour of contact was removed by the Children and Families Act 2014. It was not. The presumption remains as enshrined in the Children Act 1989. I again make a plea to the Government for parity in legislation between the rights that children have to contact with their parents when in care and those that they have for contact with their siblings. As passionately explained by my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), relationships matter deeply to children in care.

I hope that the Minister will reject the recommendation that local authorities should not presume that siblings are best placed together. I acknowledge that it is not always appropriate, which is why the law states that siblings should be placed together as far as is "reasonably practicable". This proposal, as with the false assertions about contact, is completely at odds with well-established practice and law, which is built on robust evidence.

The majority of organisations, charities, foster-carers and social workers are not only deeply concerned about some of the recommendations in the review, but disgusted by its shoddy nature. It makes assertions backed up with no evidence and at times contradicts existing research and evidence, which are coupled with an absence of children's voices and a lack of understanding of the relevant legislation and policy in this field. Can the Minister advise when his counterpart will formally respond to the report, and will he pass on the request that, in doing so, he very seriously takes into account what has been said today and these misgivings, and ensures that our foster-carers and children are, once and for all, given the respect that they deserve?

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I remind him of the convention that the motion's proposer has a short time to respond at the end of the debate.

10.39 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Thank you for the reminder, Mr Howarth. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) on securing this important debate and on a very powerful and informed opening speech. There have also been powerful speeches from the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), and a moving speech by the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law).

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak about the Government's plans for foster care. The hon. Member for Sefton Central has taken an interest in the independent review of fostering from the outset, and he discussed its purpose and remit with the Department's officials. I am glad we can revisit some of those concerns now the review has concluded.

In his excellent opening speech, the hon. Gentleman made an important point about educational outcomes for children in care, which is something that I, as Schools Minister, care deeply about. Of children in care, 17.5% achieved A to C grades in their English and maths GCSEs, compared with 58.8% of other children. The average attainment 8 score for children in care stands at about 22.8, compared with 48.1 for other children.

Alongside the independent review of fostering that the Department commissioned, the Education Committee conducted an inquiry into fostering. My hon. Friend the Minister for Children and Families is discussing the reports' findings with the Committee at this very moment—obviously the right hand arranged that meeting, while the left hand arranged the timing of this debate. We are considering the recommendations set out in the independent review alongside those made by the Education Committee. I will set out the Government's plan for a formal response to both reports, which we will publish in spring.

We recognise that not everyone will agree with the conclusions of the independent review, or of the Education Committee, but importantly, we have an opportunity to work together to improve the foster care system and to better support looked-after children and foster-parents. We cannot do that alone: not all the reports' recommendations are for central Government. It is important that we work with local authorities, independent fostering agencies, foster-parents and, of course, young people themselves, as we develop and deliver the Government's response.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central raised the issue of local government funding. He will be aware that the 2015 spending review made more than £200 billion available to local authorities for local services, including children's services, up to 2019-20—the end of the spending review period. The Government will also provide additional council tax flexibilities in 2018-19 and 2019-20. Funding for children's services is an un-ring-fenced part of the wider local government finance settlement, which gives local authorities the flexibility to focus on locally determined priorities and their statutory responsibilities. Local authorities have used that flexibility to increase spending on children's and young people's services to around £9.2 billion in 2015-16.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I appreciate that the Minister is not in his usual role. I asked the Minister for Children and Families a question yesterday that he was unable to answer, so I hope the Minister will be able to today. How does his Department square the circle with regard to local authority funding, when every other service that has an impact on children's social care is being cut and completely depleted? Social work is a holistic profession; it relies on other services that are being stripped away, day by day, under this Government.

Nick Gibb: As I said, the spending review made more than £200 billion available to local authorities for local services throughout the review period. In addition, we have introduced greater flexibilities for local authorities to raise additional funds.

Mr Sheerman: The Minister gets out and about in the country, but has he been to children's services in places such as Kirklees? In my time in Parliament, I have never seen such a crisis. We are in a ghastly situation where, because there is no money in local authorities—largely because of the time, money and resource that they are putting into care—money and resource is being taken away from our children, from child protection and from the fostering service. That is the truth, whether we like it or not.

Nick Gibb: The truth is that we have made £200 billion available for local authorities in the period up to 2019-20, as part of a balanced approach to public spending, to ensure we have a strong and stable economy that is delivering the lowest level of unemployment for more than 40 years. The Government have had to take difficult decisions in the last seven or eight years, but it is an important area of Government spending.

Our ambitions for children and young people, when they are being looked after and afterwards, are the same as for any other child. We want them to fulfil their educational potential, have good health and wellbeing, build and maintain lasting relationships, and participate positively in society. Of looked-after children, 74% are in foster care. Fostering provides stability, a safe and loving home and an alternative family environment. Children and young people in foster care have made it clear that they want to feel part of a family and have a normal life.

One of the essential messages from the "Foster Care in England" report is that foster care is working for many vulnerable children and young people. That needs to be celebrated. Research tells us that, for many children in foster care, the experience can be positive and life-changing. Coram's "Our Lives, Our Care" survey found that, in 2017, 83% of 11 to 18-year-olds living in care thought their life was getting better. Research from the Rees Centre showed that stable, high-quality care can be a protective factor educationally, and children and young people in foster care perform better at school than looked-after children as a whole, and better than children in need.

The "Foster Care in England" report draws on the evidence of children and young people, foster-carers, social workers, fostering organisations and academics to set out a broad programme of possible improvements. It is clear from both reports, and from today's debate, that we could and should do more to improve children's experiences of foster care.

Chris Law: In the writing of those two reports, how many young people did we have conversations with, listen to or take constructive feedback from on the reports' conclusions?

Nick Gibb: Young people were consulted, but I will get back to the hon. Gentleman on the precise number involved in the consultation.

Although there are areas of disagreement, there are three common themes. First, we need to ensure that enough high-quality fostering placements are available in the right place at the right time to meet the needs of children in the care system. Secondly, we need to ensure that foster-parents receive the support and respect they need and deserve for the incredibly valuable role that

they play in looking after children in care. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, we need to ensure that children and young people are listened to, that their wishes and feelings are taken into account, and that they are involved in decisions about their lives.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central also raised the issue of adoption. Stability and permanence are transformative for many children. For some children, long-term foster care will be the right choice. It is one of a range of options that includes adoptions and special guardianship, as he mentioned. The independent review asks the Department to put permanence at the heart of policy making, and we agree that that is the right thing to do.

Foster-parents play a vital role in supporting some of our most vulnerable children. They are essential for achieving high ambitions for the children in their care. They are uniquely placed to recognise the child's needs and to respond to them appropriately. However, some foster-parents feel frustrated by the treatment they receive. We need to ensure that all foster-parents receive the support and respect they need for the incredibly valuable role that they play. The two fostering reports are clear that foster-parents are the experts in the children they look after and should be recognised as such. The statutory framework sets out that foster-parents should be listened to and included in decisions about the child's care, but the evidence suggests that that does not always happen.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I am not sure whether I heard the Minister correctly. Did he say that the Department puts permanence at the heart of everything it does? Does that not deny the wishes of children who want to go into residential care, long-term foster care or other forms of care? Why is the Department riding roughshod over the views of some children?

Nick Gibb: That is not what I implied by what I said, which was that permanence was at the heart of policy making. Of course the views and rights of children are paramount in all the decisions that are made. The best interests of children will drive decision making for them.

We need to consider how foster-parents can be better supported so that they feel valued and empowered to parent the children in their care. For example, the independent review highlighted the need for greater delegation of day-to-day decision making. We will explore with the sector how we can improve guidance and practice.

Government policy is very clear that no foster-parent should be out of pocket because they are looking after a child. The Government set the national minimum allowance, and we are clear that we expect all foster-parents to receive at least that sum, but we need a better understanding of the national picture on remuneration. We will consider financial support alongside the wider package of support to ensure that foster-parents can continue to fulfil their valuable role.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central mentioned the professionalism and expertise of foster-parents. He is right that they should be treated professionally. He also mentioned the proposal for a national register of foster-carers. We are considering that recommendation. It is clear from both reports that more strategic sufficiency planning would help to secure better matches for

more children. Some form of register may help to improve referrals, because it is hard to get a real-time picture of foster-parent availability. It is essential that we do not lose the insight from social workers in individual cases or the personal interactions in making placements.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden raised the faith background of foster-parents. The Government welcome anyone of any religion or ethnicity who comes forward to foster, provided that they meet the needs of children. However, she is right to raise the issue. We have heard and noted her concerns about faith literacy. We will consider how training can be improved for social workers and foster-parents in faith literacy and other matters. There are a number of misunderstandings about fostering in general, including about who can foster. The Government's response to the reports will provide an opportunity to address the issues that she rightly raises.

The hon. Member for Wigan raised the issue of foster-carers' 30 hours of free childcare. The child's best interests have to be the paramount consideration. We are working with local authorities, and where childcare is in the child's best interests, we expect it to continue even if they move to another placement. The hon. Lady also expressed concern about the high number of placements out of area. At the end of March 2017, 60% of children in foster care had been placed inside their council boundary and 80% within 20 miles of their home. However, the national availability of foster-carers does not always reflect local need. Local authorities have a duty to ensure the availability of foster-parents. The Government are working out how we can support councils to fulfil that duty.

The hon. Lady also raised the important issue of the voice of the child. The survey of children and young people by the Children's Commissioner heard how important it was for young people to feel listened to and to have a greater role in decisions made about their lives. Several said that they felt that they did not have a say in anything and found that foster-carers and social workers dominated decisions about their placement. It is clear that the whole system needs to be better at listening and responding to the views of children and young people in its care. We are determined that children and young people have opportunities to contribute to the development of the Government's response to the two fostering reports, so they are being supported by external organisations who have the necessary expertise.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Sefton Central for this opportunity to continue debating the important issue of fostering. The independent review, the Education Committee and the many organisations and people who have contributed to the reports have given us a real opportunity to develop policy further and make a sustained change to the outcomes of children in care. The points raised today continue our important debate, and I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. As we develop our future work programme on fostering, we will continue to listen and work with all those who have an interest—not least young people themselves.

Chris Law: I am listening to the Minister with great interest, but I am astonished and appalled that he has not once mentioned the work done in Scotland, which has devolved responsibility in the matter. Is this not a perfect opportunity for Administrations to learn from

each other's experiences and draw the best conclusions? He has not even referred to the Scottish Government's good works that I spoke about or the reports that we have been doing north of the border. Judging from what he says, the idea of our working as a family of nations has clearly been totally disregarded. Will he please address it now and say that he will consider it and take it forward?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We will do just that.

Let me make a final point in the time available. The Government's priority is that any changes must make a positive difference to the lives of the 53,000 children and young people who live in foster-families, and to the lives of foster-parents. We are committed to ensuring that vulnerable children have access to the best possible care to help them to thrive and prepare them for adulthood.

10.56 am

Bill Esterson: I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in this excellent debate. The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) made an excellent speech. My hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), as ever, brought huge insight to the debate, combining passion and authority and making some brilliant points. I also thank hon. Members who made interventions. I especially thank the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) for having the bravery to tell his story. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) for her speech too.

The Minister ended his speech by saying that the Government want to make a difference to the lives of all children in care. He made many very good points and accepted the arguments that have been made today, but that is only part of the story. I thank him for congratulating me on what he called my excellent opening speech, but if he is really serious about thanking me, he should use his influence in the Department to ensure that the Government play their part in supporting foster-carers, social workers and children's services departments to reverse recent developments such as the 83% increase in children on child protection plans and the fact that the number of children in care is at its highest since 1985.

It is no good taking money away from early years and cutting early intervention by 55% and local authority spending by 49%, as this Government have done since 2010, without expecting an impact on children's services, child protection and the number of children in care. By the way, it is no good cutting support for the police service without expecting an impact either—our police service in Merseyside has had the biggest cut of all. The Government have cut £233 million of funding to my local authority since 2010 and we face severe pressures in children's services. It is a cut, not an increase. The Minister kept saying that there was an increase in the local government funding settlement in 2015, but there has not been an increase in the funding to local authorities under this Government since 2010.

The Minister is right that there are many wonderful foster-carers out there. There are many children who are given every possible chance when they go into foster care in this country, and who are provided with the love and support that they need and have every right to

[Bill Esterson]

expect. But the Minister needs to listen to those children, to their foster-carers, to the professionals who have lobbied for this debate and to those who gave evidence to the Select Committee inquiry and the stocktake. It is short-sighted and short-termist to do anything less than ensure that intervention is possible. It is failing the children and young people who need all our support.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Electric Dog Collars

11 am

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

The recent announcement by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman intended to move the motion, and say that this House has considered the use, sale and distribution of electric dog collars.

Ross Thomson: That is exactly what I wanted to say. I beg to move,

That this House has considered the use, sale and distribution of electric dog collars.

Thank you, Mr Howarth. Can you tell that this is the first Westminster Hall debate that I have secured? It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship.

As I was saying, the recent announcement by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, proposing Government action to ban electric shock collars for cats and dogs, is very welcome. Members will be aware that I have been lobbying colleagues across the Chamber to support the campaign to outlaw the use, sale and distribution of these barbaric devices. However, there is a big difference between banning the use of shock collars and stopping their sale and distribution altogether.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on a subject that I know he feels passionate about. However, can he confirm in his opening remarks that what he is proposing to ban is the shock collar that is used by humans when training dogs, rather than the collars that dogs wear that warn them when they are close to a boundary fence? Those collars serve a good purpose and even save dogs' lives if there are busy roads or other dangers beyond the fence.

Ross Thomson: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Having had numerous discussions with the Dogs Trust, as well as meeting the Secretary of State, I know that there is a difference. He is absolutely right that shock collars are controlled by humans and, depending on the device, they can control how long a shock is administered for, and those collars can even be used as devices of torture. The advice that I have had from the Dogs Trust is that although we do not like anything that administers a shock, when it comes to these boundary fences the dog itself is in control. Technically, therefore, the dog can administer the shock.

The concern with those collars for boundary fences is that if dogs were to cross the boundary fence, would they be nervous about coming back again, because they know that there is a shock coming? However, my understanding is that a ban on those collars is not being considered, because as far as the Dogs Trust, the Kennel Club and others are concerned, the dog is in control and not a human. Although they are not ideal, they are still better than an electric shock collar.

One of the key planks of my campaign has been around the sale—

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend very much for giving way in this important debate. What is his opinion on sonic collars, because they have a different function but should also probably be banned?

Ross Thomson: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. One of the things that I have learned throughout this whole campaign is the range of different devices that are available. Across the world, there are hundreds of different devices using different techniques, whether that is vibrations or shocks, to administer some form of treatment for a behaviour that is unwanted. Therefore, the consultation that has been announced is very broad, which is why I encourage Members here, as well as members of the public and all sorts of organisations and charities, to make their views known on exactly this issue and these kinds of devices.

I welcome the swift action that has been taken in Wales to ban the use of electric shock collars and I also welcome the intention of the Scottish Government to change guidance for prosecutors. However, we all know that banning the sale and distribution of these items across the UK requires action in this Parliament.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter forward and on supporting the Secretary of State in his endeavour. However, he has just touched on a point about the extent of this sort of legislation. In Northern Ireland, we currently do not have a democratic institution that could pass a legislative consent motion, for example. I am interested in hearing his views as to whether this process should extend to Scotland and Northern Ireland, and I invite the Minister to confirm whether that will be the case.

Ross Thomson: I wish to make it clear that if we are to tackle the issue of electric shock collars and properly ban their use, it has to happen right across our United Kingdom, and only this Parliament can stop the sale and distribution of these collars. We can prohibit their use, but if we really want to eradicate them, banning their sale and distribution is key. And I hope that the Minister will pick up on the point that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. A number of other Members and I applied for a similar debate, but he had better dice than us in the selection. However, it is important to recognise that he has widespread support across this House and across parties for the points that he is making. I wonder whether he would agree to ask the Minister, in the gentlest terms possible, to explain why the whole matter of the sale of these devices has been left out of the consultation that was announced this week, and to encourage the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to include the sale in that consultation.

Ross Thomson: I genuinely thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is absolutely right that we have had cross-party support on this issue. I am glad that the Government are taking action, because right across the Chamber and regardless of party colour, there is real support for action on this issue. The hon. Gentleman's intervention is very timely—

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) *rose*—

Ross Thomson: I will take another intervention, but first I will respond to the intervention from the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). I was about to discuss what has been suggested regarding the consultation since it was launched at the weekend—namely, that the Government are not seeking to ban the sale of these devices. My understanding is that that is wrong, because the consultation document itself says that the consultation is seeking views and calling for evidence on the sale of electric shock dog collars, as well as views and evidence on their use. I will quote the consultation document directly, which says that the Government

“want to hear views about what these proposals will mean for the sale and retailers of e-collars and whether any further restrictions will be required”.

I have made it clear from the outset that I would only ever welcome a Government proposal for a ban if it applied to the sale as well as the use of these devices. So, yes, I ask the Minister to confirm that it is the intention of the Government to seek a ban that covers the sale and use of these devices, and I call on those colleagues who are just as passionate as I am about banning their sale to submit their views to the consultation. In fact, I hope that all animal lovers will take the opportunity to engage in the upcoming consultation and make their feelings clear.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and I am also grateful to him for securing this very important debate. My parents have been training dogs—working dogs—for the best part of 30 years, and they have never felt the need to use these barbaric devices. My parents are good trainers and understand dogs very well. Does my hon. Friend agree with the recommendation from the Kennel Club that a ban should be rolled out across the country?

Ross Thomson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. What he highlights is some of the anecdotal evidence that has come through this campaign from people who are dog behaviourists and trainers, and who have seen the effects of the use of shock collars and how detrimental they can be. I absolutely agree with him, and with the Kennel Club recommendations, that whatever we do must happen right across the country.

Dr Cameron: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this extremely important debate. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on dog advisory welfare, I have been inundated by people contacting me from right across the United Kingdom to give their support for this campaign. I wanted to let him know about that. Also, given his passion for this subject, I wanted to ask him to consider joining the all-party group and working collaboratively on this issue and other issues, such as Lucy's law.

Ross Thomson: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She is absolutely right that there has been huge support from the public on this issue, and no doubt many of our inboxes are filled with emails about it from constituents and from others right across the country who care just as much as we do about animal welfare and driving up animal welfare standards. I congratulate her on all the

[*Ross Thomson*]

work that she has done with the all-party group. I would be absolutely delighted to join it and support it in any work that it is seeking to do, because she is right that dog welfare does not just end with banning shock collars; there is an awful lot more to do, and introducing Lucy's law is absolutely one of those things.

In the run-up to this debate, members of the public were invited to post and share their views about banning shock collars on the House of Commons Facebook page. The response to that invitation has been quite amazing and the comments are still coming in, so I thank everyone who took the time to share their thoughts. The majority of respondents believe that shock collars are not necessary to train dogs, and I will share with Members a couple of the comments. Deb said:

"There is no justification for training animals using pain, rather than reward and building trust. It is not only cruel. It risks creating behavioural issues in the short or long term that could be a risk to humans. Ban the shock collars. It's overdue."

Karen said:

"They need to be banned. It is a cruel and inhumane form of torture and abuse. If it isn't suitable to use on your human child then it shouldn't be suitable to use on a pet."

Bill said:

"If you love your dog why would you want to give them an electric shock? Why not spend time with them training them?"

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this important debate to us today. As he has just touched on, persuasion is always better than aversion. What we have is a sentient dog that is potentially living in fear, not knowing where the next shock is coming from. We must stop that cruelty as soon as we can. We must bring the ban forward and expand it, rather than just rolling on endlessly, given the time it takes to get through these things through Parliament.

Ross Thomson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. All the evidence from experts in dog training shows that when an electric shock is administered, the dog does not understand why it has received that shock. When using these collars, owners have to be incredibly precise with the timing, otherwise it can result in even more detrimental behaviour, rather than correcting the behaviour someone is seeking to change. I will come on to that, because there is worrying anecdotal evidence about cases in which people have got that wrong and what that means for the welfare of the dog.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): My hon. Friend will agree that for generations, guide dogs, sheepdogs, hearing dogs, police dogs, mountain rescue dogs and, indeed, domestic pets have been trained very successfully without the barbaric use of electric collars. Does he agree that the vast majority of the British public would aim for one outcome: a ban on the use of such collars and, equally importantly, a ban on the sale of the devices in the United Kingdom?

Ross Thomson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: there are many different positive, reward-based training techniques out there to train our dogs. Guide dogs are one of the greatest examples. People do not have to electrocute guide dogs to get them to carry out the

marvellous, wonderful things they do. I experienced it for myself when I went out in my constituency blindfolded and with a guide dog. They are incredibly intelligent and they save people's lives. People do not need to electrocute them to do so. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we are going to do this properly, we need to ban the sale and use of these devices.

Since launching the campaign, many people have been astonished that these so-called training devices are still so prevalent when there have been significant advances in positive, reward-based training. I recently met the Kennel Club and the Dogs Trust with the Secretary of State, and we made that case forcefully. The Secretary of State was struck that such devices of torture are still available. Although I welcome the announcement of a consultation by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, it is clear that the campaign cannot and should not end there. We need to continue to make the argument that someone does not have to own a pet to understand that an electric shock collar is cruel and unnecessary. They are openly marketed and sold as training aids, and they work by instilling in the animal a fear of punishment.

When fitted, shock collars deliver an electric shock either through a remote control or an automatic trigger such as a dog's bark. The punishment can last for up to 11 seconds. In some devices, the punishment can last as long as the owner holds down the button on the remote. The theory is that having received a shock the dog is more likely to do what it is asked, rather than that coming from a natural willingness to obey. Research commissioned by DEFRA showed that one in four dogs subjected to shock collars showed signs of stress compared with less than 5% who were trained by more positive methods. It was found that one third of dogs yelped when they felt a shock, and a further quarter yelped again when the punishment was repeated. The research also found that even when used by professionals, there were still long-term impacts on dog welfare.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. I congratulate him not only on securing this debate, but on the campaign he has been running so successfully over the past weeks and months. To declare an interest, I was lucky enough to prosecute animal cruelty cases at the Bar and to work for some time in the animal sphere with regards to the law. In that context, I came across and worked with a lot of animal behaviour experts. Perhaps he will discuss this in due course, but does he agree that canine behaviour is incredibly complex? That has become apparent to me. He has painted a vivid picture of the distress caused to animals by these barbaric devices, but in addition, does he agree that they simply do not work? They are counterproductive, given the complexity of dog behaviour and dog society.

Ross Thomson: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. His intervention comes at a timely point. He talked about his experience prosecuting animal cruelty cases. He mentioned how it can be complicated to time when the shocks should be given. The dog might not understand, and that can create unwanted behaviour. When I met the Kennel Club and the Dogs Trust, they raised that very concern. Owners of the devices often do not get the timing right, and that leads to unwanted behaviour.

There is a dangerous dogs case that is cited. Ostarra Langridge was prosecuted in 2001 when one of her dogs attacked and killed another dog while on a walk. A control order was imposed on Miss Langridge's dog because of its aggressive behaviour, which was attributable to the effects of the shock collar. Miss Langridge sought the help of a behaviourist when her dogs started to run away from her on their walks along the beach. The dogs were given shock collars, which Miss Langridge was told to keep on for three months and activate whenever they misbehaved, but the first time the dogs got a shock was by mistake, after a small dog they were walking past made Miss Langridge jump. From then on her pets associated the shocks with small dogs and became afraid of them. When Miss Langridge described the day in July that her dogs turned on a shih tzu, she had tears in her eyes. She stated:

"They connected the pain of the electric shock with little dogs because of the first time I used the collar. The day that machine came in this house I regret."

There should be no place for this type of outdated practice, particularly given the recent advances in positive, reward-based training. In my view, it is not enough to simply tighten up regulations. We need to outlaw these devices altogether as soon as possible.

11.17 am

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) on securing this debate on the use, sale and distribution of e-collars. As he pointed out, this is a timely debate, given the Government's announcement only three days ago that we are seeking views on a ban on the use of e-collars in England. A public consultation provides people with the opportunity to express their views on the use of e-collars. They have until 27 April to respond to the consultation, which can be found via the gov.uk website.

I begin by commending the campaigning work that my hon. Friend has done recently on this issue. He has raised it many times and has met the Secretary of State to discuss it. I also take the opportunity to pay tribute to the long-standing work in this area by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord). As long ago as 2014, he introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to ban e-collars. He has been a long-standing campaigner on these issues. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South pointed out, many people are opposed to the use of e-collars for dogs and cats. That opposition includes many of the animal welfare and veterinary organisations, such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Dogs Trust, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Blue Cross, the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals, the Kennel Club and the British Veterinary Association.

While we have signalled through the consultation our intention to act and introduce legislation, it is important to remember that in the meantime it is already an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to an animal. The maximum penalty is currently six months' imprisonment, an unlimited fine or both. We have already announced that we will increase the maximum penalty to five years' imprisonment, a fine or both. If anyone considers that someone has caused an animal unnecessary suffering by the use of an e-collar, they should report it to the relevant local authority, which

has powers to investigate such allegations under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Alternatively, they can report it to the RSPCA, which will also investigate.

The Government previously considered that e-collars should be used only as a last resort, when more conventional forms of positive reward training had failed. We also encouraged owners of such devices to read and follow the manufacturers' instructions. However, we suspect that people are taking shortcuts, thinking that an e-collar might save them money in the long run, as they would not have to commit to a series of training courses for their dog. We think it is wrong for people to conclude that a simple hand-held device that emits a static pulse is all they need to correct their dog's behaviour. As veterinarians, behaviourists, trainers and welfare organisations all tell us, it is not that simple.

Tommy Sheppard: Can the Minister be clear on whether the Government intend to review the legislation relating to the sale of such devices? He said that the consultation is about their use in England, but as the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) and others have made clear, there is great public concern about the sale of such devices. Failing to act on their sale may undermine attempts to curb their use. Can the Minister be clear whether the current consultation includes that issue, and if it does not, will he commit to reviewing it in the future?

George Eustice: I was going to come to that later, because it was one of the key points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South. The point is that the consultation leaves open that option; we are suggesting a ban on use, but we also invite views on whether that would be sufficient, or whether we should consider a wider ban. I will say a little more on that later, but first I want to describe some of the context.

In 2014, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs funded research on the use of e-collars on dogs. I stress that that research was restricted to remote hand-held devices, rather than containment fences for both cats and dogs. The research concluded that e-collars have a detrimental effect on the welfare of dogs in some cases. People need to be aware that an e-collar is by no means an easy answer to a problem. Indeed, using an e-collar may have a long-term, detrimental effect on the welfare of a beloved pet. In such circumstances, an owner could be in breach of the Animal Welfare Act 2006, leaving themselves open to prosecution.

At the time of the 2014 research—I was in the Department at the time—the Government stopped short of recommending an outright ban, for a number of reasons. Given that we were approaching a general election—frankly, since then we have all had lots of enjoyable referendums and elections that have distracted us from our duty in this place—we decided that it would be quicker to include some references in the updated dog welfare code. I pressed for that in 2015 with officials, having had representations from my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon, and those additions went into the updated dog welfare code that is currently under consideration. However, if we want it to be enforceable, and if we want clarity in the law, the Government are currently of the view that going a step further and simply banning the devices would probably give that clarity.

[George Eustice]

The difficulty with having codes that say that such devices should be used as a last resort, or that include comments that basically strengthen a presumption against the use of negative training devices, is that there is always a difficulty with enforcement. That is why, notwithstanding the position that we took then, now that we have a clear run in Parliament to address such issues without the constant distraction of forthcoming elections, it is right that we have a consultation and call for evidence, and consider going further.

As we make clear in the consultation, we want to promote the positive training of dogs. We do not consider that dogs should be subject to negative forms of training, particularly when positive methods can have such beneficial effects. There are some very good trainers out there whom people can approach about the behaviour of their dogs, and who are used to all sorts of challenges with regard to disobedient dogs. We want owners to use positive training methods as much as possible.

I have heard many arguments about individual experiences of using e-collars. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South outlined some of the anecdotes that he has received. I have heard anecdotes on both sides. There are often-quoted reactions to e-collars, such as people using the hand-held devices at the strongest setting on the first use. Another example that we have had drawn to our attention relates to containment fences. When dogs chase something beyond the boundary line, they are often too scared to return. I have also heard stories of dogs that might not be alive today were it not for e-collars, particularly when it comes to those boundary fences. The consultation provides supporters of e-collars and opponents of such devices an opportunity to express their views on the issue.

Turning to some of the specific points that have been made, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South referred to the sale of the devices. I can confirm that the consultation is open to evidence on that. We have made a specific proposal on banning the use of e-collars, because that is the approach that has been taken successfully in Wales and other countries such as Denmark and Germany. I was not intending to dwell on EU law in this debate, because obviously we have lots of debates on that in this place. However, there are potentially complexities and difficulties, partly linked to single market legislation, that could make it more difficult for us to introduce a ban on sale while we are a member of the European Union. Nevertheless, in our call for evidence and in our consultation we remain open to representations on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) raised the specific issue of sonic collars. I can confirm that the proposal covers all such electronic devices—not just shock collars, but those that emit noxious liquids or painful sonic signals. My hon. Friend the Member for

Clacton (Giles Watling) referred to his impatience to get on with it. As somebody who has been quite sympathetic to taking further action in this area since 2014, I can tell him that patience is a virtue in this House. The reality is that if we want to introduce a ban of this nature, the first step has to be a consultation and a genuine debate and discussion, giving people the opportunity to express their views. I am afraid we cannot introduce a ban without getting to the point of legislation. I hope that he will recognise that the Government have acted in this area. We have made it clear that we are publishing a consultation and inviting views, which is the crucial first step to making progress in this area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) made a very important point, which in my mind goes to the heart of the debate. He talked about the complexity of canine behaviour, and the fact that dogs can associate the shock with something else in their immediate environment. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South gave the anecdote of dogs that associated the shock with the first time that they received it, and with small dogs that were in the vicinity. I always remember my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon, at the time of his ten-minute rule Bill, giving a powerful case of a dog that had associated the shock with small children, because the shock collar had been used when children were in the area. It is clearly very damaging to confuse dogs and cause them to have concerns about small children. That could have completely unintended consequences from which we cannot row back.

In conclusion, we have had a very interesting debate, with lots of important interventions.

Gavin Robinson: I asked a specific question about the extent of proposals. Can the Minister confirm that he will look carefully and kindly on the idea of the legislation, if it is introduced, extending across the entire United Kingdom?

George Eustice: Yes. I may have given the impression that I was avoiding the point that the hon. Gentleman raised earlier. The consultation is specifically for England because it is a devolved matter at the moment. Wales introduced a similar ban—I think as long ago as 2010, from memory. I understand that the Scottish Government are consulting on something similar. Our consultation addresses England, but I am conscious of the particular issue that we have in Northern Ireland at the moment, without an Administration in place. I will happily consider the hon. Gentleman's suggestion, but I hope that he will understand that we would not want to violate the devolved settlement that we have on the issue of animal welfare.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Women and Work

[SIR DAVID CRAUSBY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered women and work.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. May I address you as Sir David? What is your preference?

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): You can. My friends don't have to, but I think they should.

Rachel Maclean: Thank you for that clarification.

Women make up half the population but, for many years, less than half the workforce. The key to female empowerment is economic independence, which is what this debate is about.

Hon. Members will know that it is only comparatively recently that women were accepted in the workplace. When I was growing up, my mum was unusual, because she worked outside the home as a GP. I had to let myself into the house when I came back from school and make my own meals, which forced me to become independent from an early age. I learned great life skills, including how to make a quick, nutritious meal for my sister and myself, as well as how to climb over garden fences and through bedroom windows when I lost my door key, which happened quite regularly. I hasten to add—I am sure hon. Members will be pleased to know—that that is not a skill I have used regularly since that time.

We women have made great strides in society from the days when it was completely normal to say that a woman's place was in the home, or we had to give up our careers when we became pregnant, or we were forced out due to attitudes and outdated policies or the unwelcoming culture of the workplace. In my very first job after university, in a large high street bank, I was the only woman recruited into my job role, at the age of 22. I remember when I was called into the top boss's office and was asked what they should write in a maternity policy if I became pregnant. They had never had a female employee in that role, let alone anyone with a baby. How times have changed. Those incidents date me of course, but they also illustrate how things have changed in just four short decades.

Women cannot achieve their potential in society, in the workplace or in the family without independent resources of their own. That is why women and work is a critically important subject and why I have called this debate. I pay tribute to the progress made under previous Governments of all colours to open up the workplace to women. It has been a long journey. Although I accept that there is always more that we can do, I will touch on a few key themes and highlight the major progress that this Conservative Government have made.

As Conservatives, we believe in helping everyone, male or female, achieve their potential. I am proud of the progress that we have made since 2010. Some 15.1 million women in the UK aged 16 and over were working in December 2017, which is 1.48 million higher than a decade ago. That represents a record high employment rate of 70.8%, and results in the smallest

gap between male and female employment rates, of just under nine percentage points, since comparable records began in 1971. As we would probably expect given that it is still the norm for women to take on the bulk of caring responsibilities in the family, women are more likely than men to be working part time, but I note that, since 2014, the growth in full-time employment for women has outpaced that of men.

Why does this matter? There is a massive evidence base that diverse teams that include men and women equally perform better. This is not just about doing something to benefit women. It is about action that benefits men and the whole of society. The evidence is overwhelming. Study after study, report after report, demonstrate beyond all doubt that diverse teams overcome groupthink, problem-solve more effectively and build better teams.

What have the Government done to encourage women into the workplace? One critical factor is being able to work flexibly or to stay in work when the alternative would be to give up work, which is very good news for individual employees and their employers, and good news for the economy. Under the Conservatives, I welcome the fact that working patterns are becoming increasingly flexible.

In the three months to August 2016, 23.2 million people were working full time—362,000 more than a year earlier. There were 8.6 million people working part time—198,000 more than a year earlier. Based on 2011 data, around 60% of employees had done some form of flexible working in the previous year, up from 56% in 2006. There is no doubt that the extension of the right to request flexible working has doubled the number of employees who are able to make a request, to more than 20 million. The former business Department—the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills—estimated that that would lead to a further 80,000 requests a year, which has led to 60,000 new working arrangements a year.

Let us pause for a moment to consider what that means in a woman's life. It means that a woman is able to have control over her work-life balance and take on the responsibilities she may face, whether that is caring for children or for elderly relatives, yet still contribute to the workplace without being discriminated against.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am very pleased that my hon. Friend has been able to secure this important debate and I am pleased to be here. I agree that having women in the workplace is not just good for women. It is also good for men. I pay personal tribute to the fact that my hon. Friend embodies that maxim through her contributions to parliamentary business. She touched elegantly on her personal experience and mentioned her mother. In terms of what drew her into having a working career, was there a particular role model? Does she think that role models in general are a critical factor in bringing women into the workplace?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for that well-considered question. He touches on the reason I requested this debate. I have a number of personal role models, the greatest of whom is my sadly departed mother-in-law, Margaret Maclean. She was a fantastic example of a woman who started her own business—not even from the kitchen table, but from the downstairs toilet.

[*Rachel Maclean*]

Many times we have been in her toilet packing up boxes of books for her book distribution business. I learned the value of hard work and never having a day off. I recognise that she did that and raised her three children, one of whom is still my husband, I am pleased to say.

We have seen in the Government's recent industrial strategy that they are committed to continue to work with businesses to make flexible working a reality for all employees across Britain and to inform the evaluation of the right to request flexible working regulations. We all know that some barriers remain to requesting flexible working. I worked in businesses for 25 years before I entered the House and I know that there are barriers for women. It is only by making overwhelming change in the culture of business and society that it will become the norm to request and to grant flexible working to women and men with caring responsibilities. It is really good news for women when forward-thinking businesses are able to have a dialogue with their staff and accommodate the reality of our lives. Of course, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) said, men also benefit from that, along with the whole family.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does she agree that apprenticeships are a very good way of allowing women and girls to achieve, progress and reach their full potential in the workforce by working flexibly? I declare an interest as chair of the apprenticeship diversity champions network.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, because it draws attention to the statistics on women and apprenticeships. Women account for the majority of apprenticeship starts in recent years—53.4% in 2016-17 and 52.8% in 2015-16. That has risen year on year under this Government, and is no doubt a tribute to the work that she is doing in championing diversity and apprenticeships in the workplace. I thank her very much for that.

Having women in the workplace is very good news for men and the culture of businesses as a whole because it encourages a more dynamic, progressive and modern workplace. When the Minister responds, will he touch on the uptake of shared parental leave, which is a fantastic policy supported by this Government and previous Governments? What more can the Government do to encourage more employers to take it up? I am sure hon. Members will agree that it is very important.

I believe that women are natural entrepreneurs, so a debate on women in work would not be complete without a celebration of our tenacity and business acumen. This is a subject close to my heart, because I have spent the past 25 years running my own business. I have battled issues that I am sure we have all faced, including mansplaining and hepeating, which is a new one—obviously, hon. Members in this Chamber are not guilty of those sins—juggling my family and my work, losing my income when my business went bust, and all the highs and devastating lows that came with that journey.

Groups of women, such as the mumpreneurs and others, are increasingly using technological tools to make a living for themselves and to set their own agenda. The latest statistics indicate that there are now

1.2 million women-led small and medium-sized businesses in the UK, which contribute an estimated £110 billion to the economy. The Government are getting behind those women with a range of realistic measures designed to help them. Government-backed start-up loans are one of the ways we are helping women to realise their talents, create jobs and boost the local and national economies, but there is more to do. Only 5.7% of women were involved in starting or running a new business last year—half the rate of men. I think that is a shame, and the Women's Business Council agrees. If women were setting up and running new businesses at the same rate as men, there would be 1 million more female entrepreneurs.

I am therefore pleased that the Government have recognised the urgency of this mission. My hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary has responded to calls from across the world of business and politics to investigate the funding gap, which women face when they try to access capital. According to the Entrepreneurs Network, men are 86% more likely to be funded by venture capital and 56% more likely to secure angel investment than women. A new study by the Federation of Small Businesses shows that one quarter of female small business owners said that the ability to access traditional funding channels is a key challenge. Many are therefore forced to rely on alternative sources for growth, such as crowdfunding, personal cash and credit.

I have personal experience of that. Before I entered Parliament, I worked for a tech start-up, and I saw for myself the barriers that women in that sector face. There is a massive disparity between men and women in that industry, which is a huge shame because women have so much potential to offer. Statistics indicate that one in eight women want to launch their own business in the UK. I agree with my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary, who said that helping more women access the capital they need presents

“a massive economic opportunity to the UK”.

That opportunity is currently untapped. I therefore look forward to seeing the results of the landmark study announced by the Treasury of the female funding gap. I hope that important lessons are learned, and that the Government do everything in their power to tackle this important issue.

The third key issue I wish to raise is that of returners, which relates to women who find it difficult to interact with the workplace. The group is loosely called returners, but it includes a lot of different women at different stages of their life. Taking a career break can often mean the end of a career or put barriers in the way of progression. I had four children and four periods of maternity leave, so I know how difficult it is to re-enter the world of work after the stress and exhaustion of having a baby. It is a joyful time, but as any new mum will say, coming back to work is hard. They have to contend with not just the sleep deprivation but the challenges of keeping up with new developments in the workplace and in technology, and of course juggling childcare. That is why I am pleased that the Government acknowledge that issue and are leading the way on it.

I hear evidence of large companies such as AXA getting on board. There are many others, but I have singled out AXA because I read the evidence that it recently gave to the Treasury Committee. It has instigated flexible working, maternity buddying and maternity

coaching to ease the transition back into the workplace. Such practices should become the norm, not the exception. By constantly talking about the importance of such issues in this place, I hope we send out the signal that the world of work has changed and will change in the future. A woman can be just as effective working from home, with a managed team and open and honest communication with her team.

When I recruited staff for very senior management positions in the business I ran, I never hesitated to recruit mothers, women with children, or even dads who wanted to work part time or school hours. That is unusual in many businesses, but I knew that they would be perfectly able to manage by using technology and virtual methods of communication to overcome the barriers of not being present. They do not need to sit at a desk to be effective. I knew that, although they were not physically present every moment of the day, their brains would be working on business problems, even while they were taking care of their children, doing the school run, preparing meals or doing the laundry. If you want anything done, ask a busy person—especially a mother or a father who is up against a deadline to collect a child. I guarantee they will get the job done.

The Government are supporting hard-working women and businesses in this country. I welcome the fact that in the 2017 spring Budget the Government committed £5 million to support people who would like to return to paid work after spending time caring for others. That funding will help to unlock the potential and benefits of work for those individuals, employers and the economy. Some 2.1 million people, nearly 90% of whom are women, are currently out of the labour market because they are looking after their home or caring for family members, so we can see how important that agenda is. More and more businesses are joining the fight and making this a boardroom issue. Change will come only when directors step up and lead, and put their money and resources where their mouth is. I call on them to acknowledge the reality of the world of work for women today.

I want to touch on the Taylor review, of which I have experience, because I was a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee for a short period. The Government are listening to and acting on the concerns raised in that important review, which looked at the world of work and recommended measures to protect all workers in our economy, including the gig economy, from being exploited. Many women work in lower-paid sectors of the economy, and they are just as entitled to good working conditions, which is why I welcome the Government's action on this issue. There is more to come.

Working is good for women. It is not just an economic proposition; it is a chance for a woman to make the most of her potential and contribute her talents. There are many other upsides, including a real impact on her health and wellbeing. The fact that being in work has a positive impact on mental health is not talked about enough. In doing research for this speech, I uncovered statistics that indicate that women who work are less likely to be depressed, to live in poverty, to be in a violent relationship or be a victim of domestic abuse, to suffer substance abuse, or to experience family breakdown. They are more likely to live a balanced, happy life. They are also less likely to be offenders or be in prison. If a woman has children and is working, the children are

more likely to grow up in a stable home with a stable experience. They are more likely to achieve academically, and are less likely to have mental health problems.

The issue of women and work touches all our lives, businesses and families, which is why I welcome Government action on it. Thank you for allowing me the time to have this debate, Sir David. I hope hon. Members agree that if a woman can work, earn and achieve in her own right, nothing can stop her and the world is her oyster.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the first of the three Front Benchers at 3.30 pm. A number of Members have indicated that they want to speak, so if Members can keep their contributions to about five minutes, I think they will all get in.

2.49 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing the debate and setting the scene so very well. I will give some stats, then some information about my own office and where I stand.

In the period October to December 2017 in the UK, 15.1 million women aged 16 and over were in employment. The employment rate was 70.8% for women, compared with 79.7% for men; 8.8 million women were working full time and 6.3 million part time; and 42% of women in employment were working part time compared with 13% of men—so part-time work for women is far above the norm elsewhere.

The most common sectors of employment for women are health and social work, accounting for 20% of all jobs held by women at September 2017; wholesale and retail, 14%; and education, 12%. Around 78% of jobs in the health and social work sector and 70% of jobs in the education sector were held by women. Around 20% of small and medium-sized enterprises with employees were led by women, and it is good to see that happening. As the hon. Member for Redditch, as a former employer, said, there is a lot more that we can do to encourage that, and I look to the Minister for his thoughts.

Men are more likely than women to be involved in total early-stage entrepreneurial activity, which includes owning or running a business less than 3.5 years old. At February 2018, 29% of directors of FTSE 100 companies were women and at the next stage down, in the FTSE 250, 23% of directors were women.

In 2010 I was elected here, my wife came over and she got a wee fridge magnet. It was a famous quote from Margaret Thatcher, which we all know: “If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman.” My wife put that on the fridge for a purpose—I am wondering whether there is a message there that she is trying to tell me—and I am reminded of it every day because it is still there.

The contribution of working women is incredible when added to the fact that many have main care of their children and also run their household—that is something that has to be recognised. As a proud employer of six staff, I must highlight that five of the six are women. One is a lady in her 50s with her children raised who works part time and minds her grandchildren part

[Jim Shannon]

time, and for whom I provide flexible working. A lady in her 40s with her children mostly grown works full time for me, and another in her 40s works part time. Another lady, in her 30s, with a two-year-old and a three-year-old, works full time doing my speeches and press—as I am sure hon. Members know, I keep her very busy on speeches, and she does a lot of overtime. On her return home, it is not unknown for her to email documentation and speeches to me for the next day at 12.30 in the morning. That is the sort of person she is, and she does it because I have given her flexible hours and she likes doing it. I do not press her about anything, letting her do it as she sees fit. A girl in her 20s also works for me four days a week.

I therefore have a staff with different ages, from different backgrounds and at different stages of their lives, and yet one similar purpose links them all together—not just my office—which is that they wish to work, and work very hard. That is what they do. I might well have lost one of my best workers when my parliamentary aide had two maternity leaves within one year, but we had the discussion of how to make changes to make things happen so that she could be a great mother and still be great in her job. I made it clear that I was willing to work with her to make it work. She has been back at work for more than a year, but I have learned that family comes first—I always believed that anyway—and that she is more than capable of holding everything together. I did not penalise her for her maternity leave, but became flexible to ensure that I did not lose a great worker.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the barriers to promoting women's full contribution in the world of work is the sufficient supply of quality childcare?

Jim Shannon: I am glad the hon. Lady mentioned that, because childcare is very important. For many ladies in my constituency, the availability of and access to childcare mean that they are able to work.

I have another great example of a working women in my mother. She is at pains to let us know—my mother tells this story about when I was born, which was a long time ago—that she was in the shop working again within 48 hours of giving birth. My mother must be a very strong lady. We owned a shop and she worked beside my dad every day. She ran our home and the shop, she helped in the church, and she regimented us with the ability of a sergeant-major or indeed a general, but at the same time she gave us a wonderful example of love and care.

I pay my staff the same wage whether they are men or women. Sadly, however, somewhere along the line as a society some people determined that it is acceptable to pay different wages for the same job, due not to job performance or ability, but to gender. I want to say clearly: that is unacceptable to me. I want to see the same wages for men and for women, so let us say that together and get it right.

Yes, there is the potential for a member of staff to take maternity leave or request flexible working hours to suit a family when they are female, but in today's society men are just as able and willing to take care of

their children, and rightly so. The gender pay gap does not simply apply in the BBC or Hollywood; we see it day in and day out, and it is not right. I would take great exception to anyone who decided that my granddaughters were worth less because they are girls—they are strong, bright, courageous and ready to take on the world, and in this day and age they should be allowed to do so without discrimination, based on their ability and not solely on their gender. That is the way that it should and must be, and we have a role to play. I am willing, as the Member of Parliament for Strangford, to do my bit to make that happen.

2.55 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this debate, which is so timely, as we have recently passed the milestone of 15 million women in work, with the south-west tying with the south-east for having the highest proportion.

I want to briefly give my two-pennyworth. I believe in opportunities and equality, and it is important to note that if women choose not to work and have the means to support themselves, that is their choice, and one that I respect as well. Many do that to look after their children. The important thing, however, is to ensure that they have the choice and that there is a level playing field. That is why the 30-hour free childcare policy is such a massive step forward, empowering and enabling women to be able to afford to work, and making work pay.

The 15-hour policy rolled out in 2010 helped 93% of three-year-olds and 96% of four-year-olds, and now hundreds of thousands of parents across the country benefit from the increase to 30 hours, which enables and incentivises people to work. I am proud that the Government made that a priority. In fact, by 2019-20 we will be spending a record of about £6 billion on childcare support. We have also invested in supporting women back into work, which is crucial. In the 2017 spring Budget, we committed £5 million to support people who would like to return to paid work after time spent caring for others.

The introduction of shared parental leave in 2015 was an egalitarian move to enable women and men to share leave. I am delighted that the Government are investing money and resource into promoting that scheme. I look forward to hearing from the Minister more about the awareness campaign. I also call on him to recognise and celebrate those companies that offer at least an element of shared corporate parental leave, which is a true step forward towards equality and choice, and one that will help to tackle the gender pay gap. I am keen to know his thoughts. For my part, I believe that fully shared corporate parental leave is the future. We should look at countries such as Iceland for a model. I know its system is very different and based on individual benefits for parental leave, but it provides a starting block and something to build on to truly have equality.

The number of women on FTSE 350 boards has doubled since 2011, and there are no longer any male-only boards in the FTSE 100, which I am proud of, but we still need to go further. I do not agree with demeaning quotas or positive discrimination, and I am not a fan of singling out particular groups. In fact, I believe that further segregation can cause discrimination. Instead, I believe

in empowering and encouraging women and all minorities to succeed and fulfil their true potential, and in levelling the playing field so that everyone gets an equal shot in life. That is why I entered politics: to facilitate and open opportunities. That is why challenging stereotypes and career preconceptions is so important.

Did you know, Sir David, that only 5.4% of women are engaged in entrepreneurial activities, compared with double that for men? Yet if women were to set up businesses at the same rate as men, there would be 150,000 more start-ups a year. The lower figure is not due to a lack of talent or to physical barriers; it is mainly because of stereotypes, preconceptions and a lack of encouragement. I do not buy the argument that men are risk takers and women are not, or that men see possibilities and women see obstacles, but constantly asserting that makes it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Women are capable of anything, so once the financial, legislative and logistical obstacles are removed, what remains are the social barriers that we place in front of women. It is these that we must tear down. We tore down the glass ceiling with equalities legislation, but some have stuck up an umbrella in its place, with negative talk and stereotyped roles. We have been tackling the remaining obstacles with the introduction of 30-hour free childcare and other policies. I want us to continue to do that, but also to foster more of a “can do, will do” attitude among everyone.

That is particularly important in tackling the severe shortage of women in STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—which fuels our skills shortage, which is something I talk about regularly in relation to my own constituency. In fact, in 2016, women accounted for just 7% of engineering apprenticeships, and only 20% of A-level physics students were female. If women in the UK had got into engineering at the same rate as men, the engineering skills gap would have been met in 2017. That is being cried out for in Wiltshire, which is a hub of engineering design and technology. Each year, I hold my own engineering festival, targeted at girls and boys, which focuses on challenging the stereotypes and social expectations around these roles, with some inspirational, hard-hitting women from companies such as Dyson, Airbus and Siemens.

I am delighted that the UK is racing to the top of Europe in terms of women's access to work, sitting 11% above the EU average. That means that women have more of a chance than ever before to be in employment. We have come a long way in my lifetime; in fact, when I was born only 3.2% of MPs were female. It is the policies of this Government that will truly make an impact over time, by tackling the obstacles, especially to childcare and shared paternity leave, enabling women to have a true choice. I urge the Government, industry and fellow hon. Members to continue focusing on dispelling stigma and stereotypes, to truly empower women and to enable them to access the jobs they want to do and that our economy needs them to do.

3.1 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this debate and on the powerful way she introduced the subject. As she said, the world of work is evolving rapidly, and we are seeing a fracturing

of the traditional working structures. The large employers with unionised workforces are being replaced by new working arrangements, and it is quite possible that those arrangements will open the door to greater discrimination. We cannot afford to rely on outdated laws to tackle discrimination—laws that, frankly, have never worked for women anyway.

As a former employment lawyer, I am far too familiar with the kind of discrimination that women face in the workplace. When I was discussing with them how they wanted to proceed, there was real anxiety, because whatever has gone on and whatever laws are in place to prevent victimisation, people know that once they raise an allegation of discrimination, regardless of what ultimately happens with that allegation, all too often the employment relationship is never the same again, if it survives at all. That would not usually manifest itself in anything blatant that could give rise to a further complaint, but many women feel that once they raise their concerns, their card is marked and their career at that particular employer is over. That is really about the culture that is created—the feeling that they do not want to make waves; the feeling that next time there is a promotion, they will not stand much of a chance; the feeling that their work colleagues are all talking about them behind their backs, and the risk, which we see in this place, that they could bump into the person they have complained about at any time.

Given that, is it any wonder that people see what happens when they raise their head above the parapet and do not feel empowered to speak out? Is it any wonder that women feel inhibited about raising concerns when, until recently, if they wanted to take a complaint any further, they would have to go into a tribunal system that the Supreme Court has declared discriminatory? We know about the huge drop in the tribunal claims once fees were introduced, and the number of sexual discrimination cases brought dropped even further, with an 87% drop, as well as a 70% drop in equal pay claims. I do not think that anybody has ever seriously considered that employers have suddenly been 87% less discriminatory. We know what that was: a barrier to justice, and a discriminatory one at that.

I want to say a few words about the success rate of discrimination claims for those who actually take their claims to the tribunal. There can be a considerable tangible impact on a woman's work prospects, which is no doubt a deterrent for many. The success rate for sex discrimination claims has been around 20% for many years, and many women will look at those odds and think that it is not worth it. The fact is that women are more than twice as likely to succeed in a claim for unfair dismissal as they are in a claim for sex discrimination. There could be any number of reasons for that, not least the complexity of bringing a discrimination claim.

The failure of women to assert their rights is a big problem. Research by the Equality and Human Rights Commission suggests that up to 54,000 women a year could be forced out of their jobs due to pregnancy discrimination. That is 11% of all pregnant women in the workplace who lose their job as a result of pregnancy discrimination. Is that not a scandal? Of the 54,000 potential claims a year relating to pregnancy discrimination, only 790 were lodged in 2015—less than 1.5% of all potential discriminatory acts resulted in a claim being lodged.

[Justin Madders]

What are the Government doing to tackle this rampant discrimination in the workplace and the inability of our system to protect women and assert their rights? It is evident that many women simply do not feel confident in asserting their right not to be discriminated against at work. Is there not a risk that this perpetuates the cycle of discrimination? Perhaps some employers do not know that what they are doing is wrong. Perhaps some will feel that they do not have to change their ways until they are forced to. Either way, the women lose out, and the employer loses out too, by demotivating and hindering people whose talents would make a significant contribution to the business if they were allowed to.

There should be no glass ceilings; everyone should have just as much chance of realising their potential. Childbirth should not be a barrier to success, and women should have the security of knowing that if things go wrong, they have a realistic avenue to seek redress and that there will be no adverse consequences for them if they challenge what they consider to be discriminatory acts.

We have a system in place that already puts security near the bottom of the pile in terms of priorities. Security should be the cornerstone of any settlement on how the workplace operates. Kosovo, Estonia, and Mexico are all rated by the OECD as having greater individual employment protection than this country. I would like to think that we could set our sights a little higher than that. Women's rights are not just about individual dignity and respect in the workplace; they bring important social and economic benefits to this country. They help to encourage a committed and engaged workforce and the retention of skilled workers. They allow people to plan their lives and to plan for a future, knowing that if they do a good job and if their employer runs its business well, they will be rewarded.

We have a responsibility to challenge discrimination wherever it appears. The evidence tells us beyond a scintilla of doubt that discrimination in the workplace is out of control. To stamp it out, we need to fundamentally question whether the current system is doing the job that we want it to.

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): I asked Members to keep their speeches to five minutes, but everyone has exceeded that a bit. That means that someone may not get the chance to speak, so please keep your contributions to below five minutes.

3.6 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): Thank you, Sir David, for the opportunity to speak. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on this debate. This is an important subject that we need to continue to talk about.

Historically, women have been under-represented across many employment sectors. My experience throughout my 30-year corporate business career affirms that, as more often than not I was the only woman in the room in every business meeting, in every country I worked in—and that was a lot of meetings. I am happy to say that the tide is turning. In 2010, the 30% Club, founded by Helena Morrissey, who is Chichester born and bred, launched a campaign to get a minimum of 30% women

on FTSE 100 boards. Today, that goal is close to being achieved, as women make up 28% of all directors of FTSE 100 companies. That progress is something to celebrate; however, there is still a lot more to be done to support women in the world of work.

Women commonly juggle multiple commitments and disproportionately take on family obligations, whether that is raising children or caring for elderly relatives. Part of the issue is the long-standing social constructs that we as a society have put in place. It is just as important to look at the roles of men at home and as it is to look at their role in the workplace. When the women and work all-party parliamentary group looked at this, the expert panel felt that improving the affordability of shared parental leave would help to create a cultural shift, by encouraging more men to share caring roles. One proposal was for shared parental leave to be paid at a greater rate than statutory maternity leave, to ensure shared parental leave is truly affordable.

In many countries, extended paternity leave schemes are already in place and are deemed to be a success. For example, in Iceland, both parents are entitled to three months of statutory leave and a further three months that can be shared between them. Consequently, women there enjoy a very high employment rate, at just under 83%. Sweden leads in the EU, with more than 75% of women in employment. Fathers receive 90 days of paid leave, which is a lot in comparison with the UK, where men receive one to two weeks. Those modern systems support women, enable them to return to the workplace and help to achieve a better gender balance in business. They will have a business case.

Last year, the employment rate for women over 16 in the UK reached a record high of 70.8%. However, these positive figures do not tell the full story: 42% of those women work part time. The effects of working part time can often mean that opportunities for promotion are limited, which has an impact on the gender pay gap. It does not have to be that way. The all-party group on women and work heard examples of good practice at the University of Sussex, which promoted Alison Phipps to a professorship, despite her being a part-time worker after having two children. I personally witnessed an excellent example of good practice when my fellow classmate at the London Business School was promoted to partner level at PricewaterhouseCoopers while she was on maternity leave.

Another factor to consider in the 21st-century workplace is self-employment. There are 1.6 million self-employed women, which accounts for the majority of the newly self-employed as well, probably because of the flexibility that comes with that option. At present, self-employed women may be eligible for maternity allowance of £140.98 a week, but not statutory maternity pay, meaning that they will receive a lot less than an employee. Similarly, casual workers or zero-hours workers do not have the right to paid leave or perhaps even to attend antenatal appointments with a healthcare professional. Such barriers negatively impact on women, and more needs to be done to address those issues.

Leo Docherty: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done, both before coming to the House and while here, to encourage women to engage in politics. It is the duty of all parliamentarians to encourage that. It is a matter of regret to me that we have only ever had male MPs for Aldershot. That is not something I want

to change too soon, but I am pleased to have some female constituents here today whom I would encourage to maintain an interest in politics.

How important does my hon. Friend think it is to encourage young women to get involved in business careers, given her experience of being an apprentice? Does she think that we are doing all that we can to encourage awareness among young women of school age of the opportunities for work and apprenticeships at that critical stage in their school career when they consider what career to go into?

Gillian Keegan: I think that for both men and women the availability of high-quality apprenticeships needs to be better understood by all children and parents, and from a young age. I did an apprenticeship at 16 and I was the only woman. There were four guys, so I was the token 20%, which is a figure we often find. It is a great way into the workplace, particularly degree-level apprenticeships, which means that people do not have to choose between education and work experience, and certainly it propelled my career.

I have mentioned self-employed women, zero-hours contracts and the barriers that women face. Millions of women have taken time out of work to raise a family, and others take time out to care for loved ones. For them it is often difficult to get back on the career ladder. Of the people who are out of paid work to care for family, 90% are women. That is a huge loss, not only to those individuals, but to our economy and businesses all over the country. I welcomed the announcement by the Minister for Women and Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), that £1.5 million is being made available to support people, particularly women, to get back into work after time out.

The fund will offer grants to help people return to work in the private sector by updating their skills and supporting businesses with guidance and a toolkit to increase employment opportunities. That is just part of the £5 million commitment made by the Prime Minister last year to help people back into employment after a career break. Similar returner schemes are already up and running in the public sector, in the health professions, social work, and the civil service. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is using the cyber-security skills impact fund to help women who have been out of the labour market to get jobs in cyber-security.

It is crucial that women have the opportunity to reach their potential and that our industries do not lose out on their valuable skills and experience. The Government have championed the rights of women in the workplace, with gender pay being just one area widely commented on. We are moving in the right direction, and I am pleased that we are having debates such as this one to address the barriers that are still present for women in work.

3.13 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) for securing this extremely important debate. I am sure it will not be a surprise that some of the interpretations that I have of the world of work are somewhat different from what has been expressed. For many of the women in my constituency, work is not a choice or a health benefit, but an absolute necessity for survival.

Last Thursday we marked International Women's Day: a day when we celebrate the victories that women have achieved so far on the path to liberation, and a day when we remember how far we have to go. That one day in the calendar is when we focus on women's issues and they are thrust into the limelight. It serves as an opportunity to briefly scrutinise our collective experience. The Labour party used the day to announce that we would fine employers who not only fail to audit their gender pay gap, but fail to take decisive action against it.

In the narrative around women at work, the focus is not always on workplace issues that affect women the most. In recent years we have seen the agenda—it is as though I knew what the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) was going to say in her speech—that applies only to women at the top. Women in this Chamber will be aware of campaigns such as the 30% Club, which aims to get at least 30% of women on the board of large public companies, and similar campaigns. I do not wish to discredit such campaigns, but I do not think it is unfair for me to say that they are irrelevant to the majority of working women in this country.

Pictures of gender-balanced boards or of women chief executive officers might be glitzy, but they are a distraction from the material reality of working-class women in this country.

Gillian Keegan: I simply want to say that I am a working-class woman who left school at 16 but still aspired to be on a board, so I would say they are relevant. They are just one part of the picture.

Laura Pidcock: Those campaigns do not focus on the reality of most working-class women in work at this point in time in our nation. As with most things, success at the top does not trickle down. *[Interruption.]* I will not take any more interventions, because of time constraints.

What good is it if a woman becomes a CEO, only to rely on an army of women on precarious contracts and on poverty pay to make her sandwiches, look after her children and clean her offices? The success of elite women does not facilitate the emancipation of lower-paid sisters in the economy. In fact, some would argue it prevents it. The experience of most women, after all, is that of a worker, not of a boss. Our obsession with boardrooms has not only failed to close the pay gap for working-class women, but produced another kind of pay gap—the gap between women at the bottom and women at the top. Professional women earn on average 80% more than unskilled women, while the difference between professional and unskilled men is still huge, at 60%.

Although a few elite women succeed, the experience for most working-class women is of a system that is completely rigged against them. It is a system in which women are on zero-hours contracts and are scared that they will not get adequate maternity pay if they want to start a family. As a proud pregnant working woman, I know that my position protects me from many of the forms of discrimination that pregnant women face in the workplace. It is a system in which women are still the main childcare providers. They represent 90% of lone parents and are terrified that they will not get enough hours to provide for their children.

It is a system in which 230,000 jobs held by women pay less than the minimum wage. The Government—let us be honest—do not even give adequate notice to

[Laura Pidcock]

women about changes to their pensions, leaving them in fear of their retirement, and then think it appropriate to suggest that those women expecting to reach retirement take an apprenticeship. It is a system in which women in low pay and poverty reduce their meal portions to allow their children to eat in the school holidays. It is a system in which unaffordable and inaccessible childcare forces women to work fewer hours or accept poorly paid, poor quality part-time positions—and, of course, as has been mentioned, they are at risk of dismissal while on maternity leave.

It has been mentioned many times in the Chamber that the fact that we have had two female Prime Ministers satisfactorily explains that the Conservatives are the party of gender equality. That is an affront to the women in my constituency and across the UK who experience much inequality. It is important that there are women in the highest positions, of course, but it is never enough to just stop there. There have always been women who have succeeded in the face of structural sexism and women who buck the trend, but we cannot and must not be satisfied with the achievements of a minority of women while most women bear the brunt of poverty and austerity.

Some Members might not know that International Women's Day started as a campaign for the rights of women garment workers in New York. Women's issues have always been inextricably linked with class issues. Only by punishing the bosses who exploit women and only by creating a social security system that recognises the inequality faced by women, will we have any hope of genuine equality at work. Fundamentally, we must give all workers the ability to collectively bargain for their own pay and terms and conditions. We need a system that challenges the gender-segregated nature of employment. I am glad that the hon. Member for Redditch secured the debate, but I can tell the House that women in my constituency will not be grateful for the way the Conservatives have treated them.

3.19 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) for bringing this important matter to the House, particularly in view of the journey that she went on in her working life. It was good to hear about the positive changes she experienced.

The influx of women into the workplace is one of the greatest social revolutions of recent decades. As my hon. Friend mentioned, in 1951 only one third of women were economically active—employed or unemployed. Today the proportion is about three quarters of women. Thanks to that remarkable change in society, workplaces across the country have benefited from the talents and contributions of women who just decades ago would not have entered those workplaces. Today women are free, and the country as a whole is more prosperous. However, there is still more to do to create equal opportunity between men and women, both in the world of work and across society.

We must make sure that no industry is closed to women because of sexist prejudice, and that no woman is paid less than a man for equal work. I was delighted to visit my local primary school, Whitehills, in Forfar,

on Monday morning to discuss the correlation between science, technology, engineering and maths and career opportunities. When I asked the 400 pupils about their career goals, it was heartening that there was no evidence of gender-specific jobs. There were would-be scientists, engineers and architects aplenty. Those young people had their minds wide open and we need to ensure that as they grow up and develop we do not narrow them in any way. All jobs are open to both genders. That is why I am proud to support the UK Government, who have required companies with more than 250 employees to publish data on their gender pay gap. It is important that we get to the root causes of the overall gender pay gap and introduce the appropriate measures to deal with them, so that the young girls I met on Monday will enter a workplace where gender discrimination is a thing of the past.

Childcare is a massive financial burden on any working family. It is no coincidence that the gender pay gap widens considerably after age 30, or that relatively few women have broken into high-ranking positions that require considerable experience. Indeed, when I decided to stand for Parliament, the question of how I would be able to have a family in years to come was raised. However, no job in this country should force any female to make a choice between career and family. Of course, individual families know best how to organise themselves and balance childcare with work commitments. However, it is crucial that the Government should offer parents the childcare support that makes achieving that balance easier and allows them to do so without being pressured by antiquated societal assumptions.

I therefore commend the Government on doubling the amount of free childcare available to parents of three and four-year-olds in England and Wales, introducing shared parental leave and pay, and encouraging more flexible working, including in the armed forces. I also support the increase in childcare hours brought in by the Scottish Government, although I believe that the roll-out was slightly ill-thought-out, and that further flexibility is required to increase parents' ability to take up the provision.

All the measures I have mentioned will help more mothers to remain in work. That will help more women to rise to the top of their field, which will help to reduce the gender pay gap. While there is certainly more to do to encourage a culture of more flexible working and of mothers and fathers sharing responsibility for childcare more equally, the measures in question are a strong start.

Women must also have an equal opportunity to use their expertise through enterprise. As has been mentioned, only 5.7% of women were involved in starting or running a new business last year. That is half the rate for men. For that reason I recently joined the *Telegraph* campaign for the Government to boost female entrepreneurship in Britain. There is a need for easier access to capital, higher levels of funding, and support from experienced mentors to guide people through that life-changing process. Astonishingly, the Federation of Small Businesses has suggested that Britain is missing up to 1.2 million new enterprises because the business potential of women remains untapped in the sector. Another poll demonstrated that two thirds of female business owners were not taken seriously when trying to secure funding for start-ups. That leaves them two options—to self-fund or to walk away. That is simply unacceptable.

I say those things with optimism about the future. Let us consider the progress that we have already made, which our great-grandmothers would not have thought remotely possible. I wholeheartedly believe that the progress we want can be made quickly. It will take action in this House and in wider society, but we should go forward with confidence that it can be done. A post-Brexit Britain has to back British businesses and I look forward to continued progress in that area.

3.25 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing it, and agreed with much of what she said, although however much progress has been made, there is still a huge amount to do.

I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group on women and work, which the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) co-chairs. Ironically, I am the secretary of the group. It is one of the most informative and best organised that I have been a member of in my past three years in Parliament. Sadly, I have not been able to attend as frequently as I did at the outset. It has done a fantastic job, complementing the work of the Women and Equalities Committee, illuminating workplace issues that affect women and bringing cross-party consensus to the search for ideas and solutions.

Through my membership of the all-party group I have learned about excellent programmes such as those at Centrica, which has a fantastic female engineering apprenticeship programme, and Royal Bank of Scotland, which does brilliant work on mentoring and female returnships. To my mind, too much intervention of that type happens in isolation. Encouraging as it is, we need more structural intervention to help to address the gender pay gap—and the gender employment gap: women still struggle to get on in traditionally male-dominated sectors. That is why I want more ambitious Government intervention on easily accessible and affordable childcare. I take the point that has been made about the expansion that has taken place already. The Scottish Government currently offer the most ambitious and far-reaching childcare support package in these isles, and that is to be welcomed.

I also want the UK Government to go further to provide greater encouragement and incentive for the take-up of shared parental leave. It was a worthy but, I believe, unfinished policy success of the coalition Government's time in office. I want more men to be confident about requesting—and to be encouraged to request—shared parental leave. However, that will happen only when there is intervention to that effect, as the hon. Member for Chichester mentioned. The change would help women in competing with men for jobs. Right now, if a man and a woman in their mid-twenties with similar credentials are job candidates and go to an interview panel, there will, sadly, although it will not necessarily be publicly articulated, be an unconscious bias away from the woman, in case she needs maternity leave. If fathers were to take on more responsibility in that area, it would clearly rebalance and equalise the opportunities for women to get on—and help them to be better fathers.

As someone who is proud to “talk flexible working” with my staff, I want more action from the Government to define what flexible working means. All employees

currently have a right to request flexible work, but there is no definition of it. Sometimes that leaves both employer and employee in a difficult position in discussions. Guidelines would help both of them to know where they stand. They would strengthen the position of women and men in securing flexible work, and employers in retaining staff and increasing productivity and morale. We are doing what we can in Scotland to make things more progressive, although we cannot act on all the areas where I would want us to.

I understand the points made by the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock). However, we have lowered the reporting threshold in the requirement on companies to publish their gender pay gap, so it now applies to those with more than 20 employees, rather than 250. We currently have the lowest gap in the UK, at 6.6% compared with 9.1% overall. We want more progress, clearly. I understand the concerns of the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), but we have led by example in matters of gender balance. We have the first female First Minister in Scotland, who chairs a gender-balanced Cabinet. We are also committed to legislating to ensure gender balance in public sector boardrooms by 2020, and to campaigning for gender balance in the boardrooms of private sector organisations that have signed our business pledge.

We welcome the debate, and understand the positivity of the hon. Member for Redditch, but there is much more that we could and should do to make sure that all of society and the whole economy can benefit from the closing of the gender pay and employment gaps.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): I will now call the last Back-Bench speaker but I expect a tiny speech—no more than two minutes.

3.29 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I will do my best, Sir David. I thank you for calling me, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this debate. It is a particular honour to speak on this important subject in the year of the 100th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote. While we celebrate the advancement of women in society, politics, and the workplace, we must also reflect on progress that still needs to be made, because especially in the workplace, women do not have parity with their male counterparts. There are many reasons why women have not secured the great progress that we deserve in recent years. I will try to address as many of those reasons as possible, and set out why I believe the Government have a duty to take action.

The first and most obvious disparity is pay. The Office for National Statistics found that men earn, on average, nearly 20% more than women, and 48 years after Labour passed the Equal Pay Act 1970, men are still paid substantially more than their female counterparts. Those figures are simply unacceptable. The gender pay gap exposes the multitude of barriers and other daily challenges that women face in the workplace. Women are unlikely to progress up the career ladder at the same speed as men. Employers may discriminate against women when recruiting due to the maternity leave they may take in future, and research published today by the

[Jo Platt]

Equality and Human Rights Commission states that six in 10 employers—59%—agree that a woman should disclose whether she is pregnant during the recruitment process. That is unacceptable; that is not what we are fighting for.

As a single mother I have experienced at first hand the enormous challenge of juggling parenthood with a sustainable career. With two young children at primary school, the only work available to me was in retail, and I met many single mothers in that position who were struggling on low pay. Many also had poor working conditions, which is something we need to combat, especially for single women. I am pleased that an all-party group for single or lone parents will soon be launched.

We cannot begin to achieve gender equality or improve social mobility across society when half the population face a different set of social rules from the other half. We have a duty as parliamentarians to do all we can to level the playing field and support women in the workplace, and we know that Government intervention in that area works. I therefore hope that when responding to the debate, the Minister will set out in detailed terms the measures to be taken to address the inequalities that women face in the workplace. We cannot strive to move forward as a country when half of employees are held back. Time is up on unequal conditions and treatment; we need action now for a fair workplace.

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Everybody pinches a minute. I will now call the Opposition Front-Bench speakers, but I ask them to limit their speeches to under nine minutes to allow the Minister an opportunity to respond.

3.33 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir David. It is also a pleasure, as a woman with all the privileges of an MP, to get up on my pins in this place and talk about issues that affect women all around us. We have a moral obligation to speak for women who do not have the same opportunities to speak out, and that includes many women who work here but are not Members. Dignity at work for women everywhere should be one of our core demands in politics. This is not about women getting a special deal; it is about dignity and respect.

I commend the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) for securing this debate. She made the important point that the key to female empowerment is economic independence. She shared some of her own experiences, and said that fairer treatment for women is good for the culture of any business as a whole. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) shared the experiences of some of his colleagues and family members and—as often happens in this place—such examples can illustrate political points better than any number of statistics from the Library. The hon. Members for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) spoke about looking elsewhere in the world for inspiration to tackle the UK's problems in this area, and I hope to provide some ideas from Scotland that the Minister may wish to contemplate. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) gave us the benefit of his legal background and experience and called for

greater employment protections for women against discrimination. The hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) spoke with characteristic passion about the pay gap between those at the bottom of the pay scale and those at the top, and of structural sexism—very important points.

I am particularly pleased to speak in a debate secured by the hon. Member for Redditch because I remember her in November last year advising 65-year-old women to get an apprenticeship—that was also mentioned by the hon. Member for North West Durham. I am not sure why those women would want to undertake an apprenticeship if not to begin a career that would last a few decades, but perhaps things are a little different down Redditch way. The speech by the hon. Member for Redditch was very complimentary about the UK Government's track record in this area, but sadly I would argue that the Government she supports are very bad at supporting women in work. I could run through the entire gamut of failures, but I will settle for just a few.

First, the two-child cap for child tax credits. Whoever thought that that was a good idea? Who sat down one day and thought that the third child costs nothing to bring up? Who thought that the best way to help parents survive in a challenging job market is to cut the amount of money they have to live on? How does that help children to grow up strong enough to be productive members of society and contribute to the economy? Women's Aid calculated that that move alone put 200,000 children below the poverty line—that is 200,000 children going hungry because this Government lack simple human decency.

Library research from last year showed that 86% of the impact of austerity cuts lands on women and will continue to do so in future. WASPI women who are not too busy doing an apprenticeship will tell you just how unfair the sudden hikes in retirement age are. Indeed, the costs to individuals associated with the gender pay gap continue into retirement because female retirees end up with smaller pensions than their male counterparts, but still there is no action to address that.

Law firm Travers Smith reported yesterday that the pay gap between its employees was 14.7%—women are paid only six sevenths of what men are paid in the same firm. For bonus pay, women are paid 37.8% less. Those figures are not because women do different jobs. Female associates are paid less than male associates, and female senior associates are paid less than male senior associates. It is the same in other big law firms. Women are the poorer sisters again and again and again.

The gender pay gap is not the only problem. The Government had to be dragged through the courts in order to scrap employment tribunal charges that prevented access to justice for lower-paid workers—a policy that adversely affected far more women than men. Losing the employment protections afforded by the threat of effective enforcement would have been one more poke in the eye for female workers. Discrimination against working women is rife. As the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston said, the report by the Equality and Human Rights Commission stated that 11% of mothers reported that they were either dismissed, made compulsorily redundant when others in their workplace were not, or treated so poorly that they felt they had to leave their job. That could mean as many as 54,000 mothers a

year facing pregnancy discrimination. About twice as many mothers—one in five—said that they experienced harassment or negative comments related to pregnancy or flexible working from their employer and/or colleagues. That could affect as many as 100,000 mothers a year.

As for the thought that some gender balance might start to creep into the boards of top companies, or indeed the civil service—dream on. The European Institute for Gender Equality released an update to the gender equality index which for the UK showed no progress in many areas over the past 10 years, including for decision-making powers in the business sector. Of 18 permanent secretaries in the UK civil service, only five are women.

The UK Government seem to be doing little to help to rebalance gender opportunities. By contrast—this was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray)—the gender-balanced Cabinet in the Scottish Government is leading the way. It has established a fair work convention aimed at developing a fair employment and workplace framework for women. It has committed to achieving gender balance on private, public, and third sector boards by 2020, and it has established a strategic group on women and work to tackle the barriers faced by women in the labour market.

Let me offer another example to show that things do not have to be this way. Microbusinesses offer real opportunities and could have a significant economic impact on women. One example of good practice is the Etsy platform for the creative industries, which gives people with internet access and a good idea the opportunity to trade globally. Its flexibility and ease of access has brought forward a whole range of artistic women entrepreneurs. A whopping 86% of Etsy sellers are women, in stark contrast to just 20% of small and medium-sized business owners generally. A large chunk—32%—are from rural communities, and they are younger: the median age of the workforce is 38, with 67% under 45. Most microbusinesses are outside traditional full-time employment models: 62% of their owners are part of the independent workforce, and only 21% have full-time jobs elsewhere.

That shows that providing small-scale opportunities for flexible working is massively beneficial for women entrepreneurs and the economy, and leads to a good geographical spread of income. It also suggests that employers are missing out on the huge productivity that they would get from their female employees if only they embraced more flexible working. When barriers are reduced, traditional stereotypes and gender imbalances in the workforce disappear and women are shown to be just as productive as men. The Government should work to remove those barriers and enable women into work, not just in microbusinesses but across all sectors.

Let me make a very important final point. Women have to be able to work with dignity. That means that they have to be able to work free of harassment, abuse, sexism and misogyny. We know that a lot of work needs to be done to make that a reality. The Scottish National party is not immune to that, as the recent case of Mark McDonald demonstrates, and nor is any other party in this place. I am glad that my party took action when that issue was brought up, but none of us has a halo. We may need more than encouragement and good intentions. We may very well need new legislation. Perhaps the Minister will indicate whether the Government are open to that.

3.41 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this really important debate and on her wide-ranging speech. It is clear from the contributions we have heard that we are all aware of the importance of equality, to put it in a nutshell, and I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) in particular for giving such a thorough account of all those contributions.

It is hard to believe that until 1946 a marriage bar prevented married women from joining the civil service, and women civil servants had to resign on marrying unless they were given an exemption. It is even harder to believe that the Foreign Office did not remove that bar until 1973. Although we have come a long way in some respects, the continuing gender pay gap, the greater prevalence of zero-hours contracts among women, and the Weinstein scandal remind us how limited progress has been in others.

Women born in the 1950s have lived through major changes in the workplace. They should have the right to a decent pension, but instead their state pension age was changed without sufficient notice for them to prepare properly. Labour would extend pension credit to the women affected and allow them to retire at 64 on a reduced state pension, rather than wait until 66, if they chose to do so. Will the Government act, even at this late stage, to give women born in the 1950s justice?

Many Members mentioned the gender pay gap. It was of course a Labour Government who passed the Equal Pay Act 1970, following the brave fight for justice by Dagenham women who were employed sewing car seat covers. It is less well known that a factor behind the introduction of that Act was the expectation that the UK would soon accede to the European Economic Community, so UK legislation needed to be in line with the treaty of Rome, which requires that men and women receive equal pay for equal work. That helps to illustrate why the Opposition have fought so hard to amend clause 7 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which was designed to give the Government the power to amend by statutory instrument, primary legislation such as the Equal Pay Act.

The gender pay gap has narrowed over time, but it remains more than 9% for full-time employees and more than double that—18.4%—for employees overall. Men are more heavily represented in highly paid occupations: 72% of chief executives, 70% of managers and directors, and 92% of people in skilled trades are men. For example, easyJet reported a gender pay gap of just under 52%. The main reason for that is that most of the airline's pilots are male and the average salary for a pilot is £92,000 a year, but more than two-thirds of easyJet cabin crew are women and the average salary for that job is £25,500. Women far outnumber men among health and social work professionals, yet the gender pay gap in that sector is nearly 19%. Some 58% of students accepted on to medicine and dentistry courses in 2016 were women, but only around 16% of consultant surgeons were. Paediatrics was the only specialty where more than a quarter of consultants were women. In contrast, in 2016 only around 11% of registered UK nurses were male.

[Margaret Greenwood]

Companies with more than 250 employees are required to complete a gender audit of pay by April 2018, but the legislation has no teeth. They are not required to do anything about their gender pay gap: the only sanction they will suffer is reputational damage, significant though that may be. Will the Government introduce tough new rules, as Labour would, to fine companies with large gender pay gaps that do not take action to close them?

Another part of the explanation for the overall gender pay gap is that, in general, a far higher percentage of women than men are in part-time employment. Part-time work tends to be paid less well than full-time work, and it offers fewer opportunities for progression. At the last count, 42% of women in employment were working part time, compared with 13% of men—more than 6 million women, compared with 2.25 million men. That difference is especially marked from the age of 30 onwards. That no doubt reflects the fact that women still overwhelmingly play a greater role in bringing up children, caring for other family members and doing household work. Among people over 30, the percentage of men who work full time is around a third higher than the percentage of women. The gender pay gap also rises among older age groups: it is around 2% for full-time workers in their 20s and 30s, but increases to nearly 14% for full-time workers aged 40 to 49.

Those figures should not be allowed to disguise the reality that part-time and flexible work can still be difficult to find. Since last April, mothers whose youngest child is aged three, rather than five as previously, have been required to look for work if they are claiming social security. Many mothers with very young children want to work, but affordable childcare that fits around work is extremely difficult to find in a lot of places, as is work that fits with childcare. Under universal credit, childcare costs have to be paid up front and then reclaimed, which is not the case with tax credits. That is a major outlay for parents, who would not be claiming universal credit unless they were on a low income in the first place. Citizens Advice has also highlighted problems with the online system for universal credit, which does not accept receipts for childcare unless they are in a specific form. Can the Minister assure us that those problems have been resolved?

A study by Gingerbread of employment opportunities for single mothers found that very few part-time jobs were advertised on the Government's own job search portal, which all jobseekers are required to register with. Will the Government ensure that the claimant commitments of parents of very young children—in particular single parents—reflect the availability of childcare and part-time work?

Women are more likely than men to be on a zero-hours contract: 3% of women in work are on one, compared with 2% of men. They are also more likely to be in temporary work: 5% of women are, as opposed to 4% of men. Insecure work can have different implications for women. Caring responsibilities are difficult to fit in with insecure work, because a parent or carer may not be able to drop everything at short notice for a shift. Will the Government take action to ban exploitative zero-hours contracts, as Labour would?

In her Mansion House speech on 2 March, the Prime Minister said that the UK would
“not engage in a race to the bottom in the standards and protections”

of workers' rights. We should be far more ambitious than that. The EU is looking to extend those rights by, for example, requiring employers to give workers on zero-hours contracts a written statement of their pay rates and expected hours of work. Will the Government ensure that they match such advances in employment rights, so that UK workers do not have less protection than workers in other parts of Europe after we leave the EU?

The Government estimate that universal credit will bring as many as 1 million people under in-work conditionality by the time it is fully rolled out, which means that people who are in work but on a low income will be asked to increase their hours. However, some sectors, such as retail, where women workers are heavily represented, tend to offer extra hours at weekends or evenings, which are much more difficult to fit around caring responsibilities than daytime hours during the week. What assessment have the Government made of the impact of in-work conditionality on the number of women at risk of being sanctioned?

There is also evidence that women on zero-hours contracts or in temporary work may be at a higher risk of sexual harassment at work, because there is a greater power imbalance between an employer and someone who does not have a permanent contract. Women in that situation may be more reluctant to report harassment, for fear of losing out in future on work that they desperately need, and there may not be a proper HR structure for people to report abuse. In 2014, an employment tribunal imposed £19,500 damages on an employer in a case of that kind. The level of those damages in part reflected the employer's failure to follow up the complaint, but the tribunal also gave weight to the fact that the employee was on a zero-hours contract and so could be said to be more vulnerable.

It is illegal to treat women less favourably at work as a result of pregnancy or maternity leave. Statutory rights to maternity leave and maternity pay were first introduced in 1975 under a Labour Government. While it is true that domestic legislation predated European directives in this area, European legislation has also led to the extension of rights, such as improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers, and workers who are new mothers. Here again, will the Government ensure that workers in the UK do not come to have lesser rights than their European counterparts as European legislation develops in the area of parental leave?

Rights are one thing; the exercise of those rights and enforcement is just as important. A survey for the TUC shows that one in 10 women found that when they returned to work, they were given a more junior position. In the five years from 2008 to 2013, more than 9,000 women brought tribunal claims on the grounds of unfair dismissal or unfair treatment as a result of pregnancy. It may be even more common than those figures suggest, as many women may not be aware of their rights or simply decide it is too much trouble to fight against discrimination.

Pregnancy and maternity claims fell by one quarter following the introduction of fees, which highlights how important a factor fees were in dissuading people to fight for their rights. Labour pledged to abolish tribunal fees at the last election, and thankfully the Supreme Court ruled in July 2017 that fees were illegal. Statistics published a few days ago show that in the six months after that judgment, the number of employment cases overall taken to a tribunal rose by 100%—although that

increase is on a number reduced as a result of fees. Even so, a senior employment lawyer at the solicitors Kingsley Napley recently highlighted that the system is struggling to cope with the increase, as funding for tribunals was cut in the wake of the introduction of fees. At London South tribunal, for example, current estimates are that the parties in a discrimination case that may last two or three days will have to wait until late this year or early next year for it to be heard. The basis of the Supreme Court judgment was that fees impeded access to justice, but so does excessive delay. Will the Government ensure that the tribunal system is properly resourced?

What of the future? As has been said, since 2010 more women than men have started apprenticeships, which is a sign of positive change. A major factor in that was the announcement in 2009 by the last Labour Government of 50,000 new social care apprenticeships and more than 5,000 apprenticeships in the NHS.

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. I think the Minister needs a chance to reply.

Margaret Greenwood: May I finish my speech?

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Very quickly.

Margaret Greenwood: My final line is that we must fight for equal rights at work, because they are essential if we are to have an equal society.

3.52 pm

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this important debate. In her speech, she spoke with passion and from the heart about her own experiences. It is often our shared experiences that drive us to bring about change and improvements. There was a discussion about role models, as raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), and he is right: they matter as well.

Many colleagues noted that last week we celebrated International Women's Day, when we reflected on the achievements and progress of women not only in the workplace but in everyday life. This year's theme encouraged everyone, regardless of gender, to press for progress—to think, act and be more gender-inclusive every day. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch that it is important that we celebrate the success and the progress that we are making for women in work, but I also agree with many colleagues that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) noted, there is more to do.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and others talked about the joint-record high for female employment, which, at 70.8%, is five percentage points higher than in 2010. I have no wish to introduce any note of rancour in the debate, but I point out that under the last Labour Government the highest rate was 67%, back in 2008. I agree that all of us—politicians and businesses—should be working together to improve the employment rate further.

Laura Pidcock: It is irrefutable that there are more people in employment, but does the Minister acknowledge that work is more precarious, and that people have to do two or three jobs?

Alok Sharma: Unfortunately we do not have time for a long debate on this, but as I have said previously in the House, the welfare changes we have brought forward actually ensure that work pays. The hon. Lady will disagree, but I am sure that she will welcome the money made available in terms of childcare costs, as the hon. Members for Burnley (Julie Cooper) and for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and my hon. Friends the Members for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) and for Angus did. When I was first elected in 2010 and talking in my constituency to many parents—especially mums—of young children, the cost of childcare was a key barrier to returning to work and increasing their hours. We have acted by introducing 30 hours' free childcare for working parents of three and four-year-olds and tax-free childcare, and under universal credit the Government will cover up to 85% of childcare costs for eligible claimants. It is worth noting that an independent evaluation of the early roll-out of the childcare offer shows that parents are working much more flexibly and about 23% of mothers have been able to increase their hours as a result of that support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch and others referred to returners. Of course, putting in £5 million to fund specially designed programmes to help returners to the workplace in both the public sector and the private sector is very important. We should encourage that.

I do not think anyone mentioned the issue of women of black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, but we should be celebrating that the employment rate for BAME people is at its highest rate since records began, at 64.8%. An extra 1.1 million people of BAME backgrounds have got into work since 2010, and almost exactly half of that increase is women. However, there is much further to go. Women from some BAME backgrounds have an employment rate of only 51.6%, and as part of the Government's race disparity audit follow-up we are working on pilots to see how to address that issue in the 20 challenge areas identified around the country.

We discussed the gender pay gap. The Prime Minister has made it clear that tackling injustices such as the gender pay gap is part of building a country that works for everyone. I am proud that last year we introduced groundbreaking regulations requiring large employers in all sectors to publish the differences between what they pay their male and female staff in average salaries and bonuses.

The hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) talked about what we are doing further. Of course, we are encouraging organisations to go beyond the mandatory requirements and, for example, publishing an action plan that sets out how they will close the gender pay gap in their companies. She is right that reputation does matter. In my role as Employment Minister, I talk to people who run companies, and they recognise that having a workforce that is representative of the country is important, so they will take this matter seriously.

We had a discussion about the increase in the percentage of women on boards, which the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) did not think was making a difference. Actually, if the people at the top of a company are representative, that makes a huge difference. I have to say, I really welcome the fact that we have a second female Prime Minister.

[Alok Sharma]

I am fast running out of time, but we had a discussion about the Taylor review and flexible working. One of the review's key outcomes is a recommendation for employers to offer more flexible working.

A number of points were raised on shared parental leave by my hon. Friends the Members for Chippenham and for Redditch. I confirm that the Government Equalities Office and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have launched a £1.5 million campaign to promote shared parental leave. There was also a discussion on encouraging women into science, technology, engineering and maths jobs, and the Government are making more funding available for that.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) spoke about discrimination. He will be aware that maternity discrimination is against the law, and the Government are working with ACAS to update guidance. As I said, there was a discussion on the Taylor review, and the Government have launched a number of consultations, which will make a difference.

We are almost out of time, but we have had a really thoughtful and comprehensive debate. Hon. Members have highlighted the significant progress made since 2010, but we should be under no illusions: there is further to go, and it is absolutely imperative that all of us strain every sinew to ensure we have a workforce in Britain that reflects the modern, diverse country that we are.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered women and work.

Allergy Awareness in Schools

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered allergy awareness in schools.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, as we discuss the issue of allergy awareness. It is a serious issue, and I look forward to discussing it and hearing from the Minister later on. I will talk about the serious and growing problem of allergies and the challenges faced by those who have them, the portrayal of allergies in the media and how that shapes our attitudes, the horrendous incidents of allergy bullying in schools and the potential for fatalities, and what we can do to raise awareness in schools and beyond.

First, I feel I should declare an interest; I had my first allergic reaction when I was four years old. I walked to the shop with my grandmother, where we bought a bar of chocolate—a Marathon, which shows my age—and by the time we had walked back up to the end of the street I had vomited up the Marathon. When I was a small child, happily, that was as far as the allergy went. It was not life-threatening; it was certainly an inconvenience and something to be avoided, but it was not as serious as it later became.

When I reached my teenage years, the reactions became more serious and began to include swelling in my mouth and throat. That was when I was prescribed an EpiPen injector, which I carry, regularly updated, in my handbag to this day and take with me wherever I go. That is an important thing for anyone who has been prescribed an adrenaline injector to do.

The experience of going through an anaphylactic reaction is terrifying. It involves a whole-body physiological reaction. I start to get a tingle in my mouth if I have eaten something that has nuts in it. I feel almost a rasping at the back of my throat. That, for me, is the tell-tale sign, at which point I try to take action. I sometimes try to make myself sick, to expel whatever it is I have eaten, although I know that can sometimes be problematic. I never really know how serious the reaction will be; sometimes it is mild and can be treated with antihistamine, and sometimes it develops into full-blown anaphylaxis. It is difficult for me as an individual to know which it will be.

When it does become anaphylaxis, that is when the heart starts beating. I find it is quite similar to having an asthma attack, where breathing becomes incredibly difficult. My face swells up and changes colour to become a sort of red-purple, I have palpitations, and it is not a pleasant sensation. Ultimately I need the adrenalin injector and treatment in hospital; I thank the NHS and indeed the health services in countries around the world where I have experienced this, as I literally owe my life to them.

I know what it is like to experience it as a sufferer myself, but I also want to describe how one mother talked about having her toddler try a walnut sauce for the first time. She said:

“His mouth started to bubble and mini-hives appeared. I could see the hives getting bigger and spreading all over his cheeks, his ears, up the back of his neck and starting to go down his chest.

On the car on the way to hospital, he started to cough and vomit everywhere in the backseat. My greatest fear started to kick in when the choking, vomiting and crying turned to utter silence. He had gone limp. I was saying 'C'mon buddy. Wake up'."

She says:

"‘This is it,’ I thought. ‘I’ve killed my boy’."

That little boy received hospital treatment and lived, but I ask hon. Members to put themselves in that parent’s shoes—particularly for that first reaction, when they do not know what is happening, the anaphylaxis is so terrifying and the child is of an age where they cannot even tell them what their symptoms are and what they are experiencing.

At this point, I pay tribute to Nicky Forrest, a mum in my constituency who, in addition to all sorts of work on the parent council of a local school, runs a local support group for allergy sufferers and their parents so they can share their experiences, advise one another and campaign.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case. Does she agree that schools need to educate children and parents further, so that children who have allergies can socialise like any other child?

Jo Swinson: Absolutely. As I can attest, having an allergy is a condition that can be managed and need not prevent someone from having a full life and taking part in school and all the educational opportunities, but that relies on a wider awareness of allergy. Indeed, living with allergy as an adult is the same.

That is why awareness and education are so important—even more so because the prevalence of allergies in our society is growing. It is now estimated that about 2% of children have a nut allergy; of course there are many other allergens as well, so if we include other foods the percentage is higher. Last year in England there were more than 1,900 food-related hospital admissions for anaphylaxis. The anaphylaxis hospital admission rate increased sevenfold between 1992 and 2012. The UK is not alone in that, as there are other countries where the prevalence of allergies is growing, but we need to recognise it as a serious health issue. Indeed, it can be fatal. Data over the same period from 1992 to 2012 showed 124 fatalities were likely to be due to food-based anaphylaxis, 48 of which were school-aged children. For one in six of those school-aged children who died, the reactions occurred in school or another educational environment. The role of schools in this is crucial.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. Since the Human Medicines (Amendment) Regulations 2017, adrenalin auto-injectors can be held by schools, but it is crucial that the education goes to teaching staff, who are reluctant to use them as well. Will she comment on that?

Jo Swinson: I certainly will. I praise the change to the regulations, which is a positive thing. It would be great if schools had some help with the cost of the injectors, because they go out of date; they typically last from a year to 18 months before they have to be replaced, and they can cost from £30 to £100 each, but the change is very helpful.

The hon. Lady is right about the training element. I was scared about using my own EpiPen. I carried it for years before I used it, and I used to go to hospital if

something happened because I was petrified about what would happen if I used it. The first time I used it, I was on a parliamentary trip looking at human rights issues in Chechnya, and it was not safe to go to hospital because we had to go everywhere under armed guard. I was in a situation where I had to use the EpiPen, and I was really scared. Nicole, a wonderful woman from the human rights group who was with me, held my hand. We read the instructions and we did it together.

It started to work really quickly, and the relief and the experience of doing it have made me say to other people with EpiPens, "If you’re experiencing your reaction, use it. Then go to hospital, absolutely, but use that EpiPen, because it starts to work right away and delay can be fatal." I know the experience I had is probably shared by others, but it is not the best medical advice. The more we can train and encourage people that it is a positive thing to do and will bring relief to someone who is having that kind of reaction is important.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Lady for introducing today’s debate. I too declare an interest, because my 15-year-old son has a severe peanut allergy. We have gone through life having to manage it since he was seven. I have only praise for my son’s primary school, which managed the medications and the out-of-date medications when the date was coming up. My worry and concern, not just for my son but for others in the same position, is secondary school, because things completely change. There are 1,000-plus pupils in the school, including teenagers who are difficult to manage and seem to think, "It’s okay, we can manage this." My son’s reaction is so severe that if somebody else in the room has a bag of peanuts he reacts and needs his medication. I will get to the point: we need to inform other pupils and teachers of the seriousness of this.

Jo Swinson: I absolutely concur. That is why this wider awareness is important. Of course individuals need to have the information to manage their own condition, but particularly in those teenage years it can be more difficult for people. They feel a bit more awkward when they are eating out, because they might be perceived to be making a fuss. It is not making a fuss, but that is how it can feel in a group negotiating all sorts of adolescent relationships. For others to understand the seriousness of this is incredibly important.

There is not always a blanket ban on allergens. Schools make their own decisions. Some schools in East Dunbartonshire have become a nut-free zone, but that does not have to be the approach that is always taken—it depends on the specific risk being managed. However, reporting in the media is an important part of how we look at allergies, and food allergy and food intolerance are often conflated. Food intolerance, in particular, can get a pretty bad press.

We know that it is an issue at the school gates and on play dates, where parents of children with allergies can be viewed as neurotic or over-protective. Eating out can be a minefield. Improvements have been made in food labelling over the years, thanks largely to the European Union, which has driven that. Now the key allergens are listed in bold on the back of packets—they are very clearly marked. Indeed, since the 2014 regulations came in, we have the right to that information when eating out, about what food ingredients are going into what we are about to eat.

[Jo Swinson]

Restaurants, however, can easily become complacent. We had a prosecution, thankfully, which showed at least that the criminal justice system would take this seriously. An Indian restaurant owner, who had a cavalier attitude to safety, was jailed for manslaughter after a customer died from a nut allergy, because the restaurant had taken the liberty of swapping almond powder for a cheaper one containing peanuts and had not included that information on the menu.

Just a few months ago, top chef Raymond Blanc was at the BBC Good Food Show. He said:

“We are a kitchen not a hospital. Of course, now, if you don’t have an allergy, you’re nobody... It’s a very great fashion to have a food intolerance.”

I really think we do not need comments like that. They rather undermine his other claims to take diners with allergies seriously.

That attitude is really familiar to people with allergies. There is either the excessive response: “Well, you’ve got an allergy. We cannot possibly serve you, because we can’t guarantee anything, so, frankly, just go away and never eat out.” Or there is the response, equivalent to that eye-roll, which assumes that someone is making a fuss about nothing, and then people do not check the ingredients properly and that is when fatalities can happen. Many hon. Members will be aware of the case of Amy May Shead who, in 2014, was left with permanent brain damage when she suffered anaphylactic shock and cardiac arrest after consuming a dish that contained nuts in a restaurant when she was on holiday.

I have also raised the issue of parents of children with allergies being afraid when flying abroad, because they are worried about an allergic reaction happening in the air. I raised that at Transport questions and recently met campaigners and the Minister for aviation to discuss how to take that forward. Part of this is about the airlines getting their act together, but it is also about the air hostesses and air hosts on the plane having a wider understanding of allergies, so that they do not have the kind of really insensitive reactions that were reported by some parents. In one case, somebody made requests for an announcement to be made and had been deemed to be an over-protective parent. When the child and his mum got off the flight, the air host said, “See, we didn’t kill you, did we?” When we hear stories like that, we realise how far we have to go in raising awareness. This is quite a difficult issue to categorise. There are issues around health, education, transport and media, so it requires cross-governmental working.

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): Is it not the case that it is impossible to separate the question of allergies in schools from wider paediatric allergy support in the communities? The postcode lotteries are creating problems with access to suitable specialist support, as well as blood tests and so on. The work of the Department for Education and of the Department of Health and Social Care needs to go hand in hand.

Jo Swinson: I absolutely concur with the hon. Gentleman. I would argue that this is a public health issue that needs to involve all Government Departments. I thank him for the important work he does with the all-party

parliamentary group on allergy. Perhaps I will spy in the Chamber a few hon. Members whom we might approach to become members of that group.

Some schools take the action of banning nuts on the premises following a risk assessment. When that happened in Exeter a few months ago, we were greeted by this headline on the *Mail Online*:

“‘The only nut ban should be the head’: Parents blast primary headteacher’s ‘ridiculous’ proposal to completely bar nuts from school grounds”.

That focuses on the anger and outrage of parents, rather than the potential threat to the lives of children in the school. These articles are often written in a way that encourages outrage on the part of readers, as if children with allergies are somehow an inconvenience to everybody else.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for informing us on this subject. I do not have a nut allergy, nor do I know anyone with a nut allergy, but I have met people who are concerned not just about allergies in school, but about other medical conditions such as diabetes. They are concerned about the ability of staff to be available to help if a child gets into difficulties at school. The issue is not only training for schools, but monitoring and enforcement, perhaps by Ofsted, to ensure that those training plans are in place and that kids can have access to everything, including sports and all the other things that they would like to do in school.

Jo Swinson: I quite agree with the hon. Lady. Indeed, my sister has had type 1 diabetes from a very young age. The ability of schools to incorporate children with a range of conditions and ensure there is wider awareness, so that those children can play a full part in the life of the school, is really important.

On Friday, Sony’s new film “Peter Rabbit” will be released in the UK. The villain of the piece, Tom McGregor, is allergic to blackberries. One scene in the movie shows the rabbits—our beloved Peter Rabbit—deliberately pelting a blackberry into Tom’s mouth with a slingshot. Tom goes into anaphylactic shock, before stabbing himself with an EpiPen and then collapsing.

What do we make of that? I suppose we could argue that it shows that allergies can be dangerous, but I would take the view that for a popular children’s character to be light-heartedly encouraging behaviour that threatens the life of someone else, who is at risk of anaphylaxis, is unacceptable. Imagine that there was a scenario in which Peter Rabbit decided to start throwing knives at someone. We would not think that was acceptable viewing for young children in the cinema. What message does this send to children about how we treat people who have allergies and anaphylaxis? What message is going to be taken by the children who go to see that film and who have an allergy?

Apparently, Sony recognises that food allergies are a serious issue and that its film

“should not have made light”

of Peter Rabbit’s arch-nemesis being allergic to blackberries, “even in a cartoonish...way.”

However, it is that cartoonish, slapstick portrayal that is the problem—it trivialises allergies in that way. I have written to Sony to request that in addition to that

apology, that scene should be cut from the film when it is released. I think it has done that in one country. I hope that the Minister will add his voice to that request, because the truth is that children suffering from allergies experience that kind of onslaught in school.

Allergy bullying is a real problem. According to a recent study, more than one third of children and teens with food allergies have been bullied specifically because of their food allergies, usually by classmates. Sometimes that includes physical threats with foods. The consequences can be fatal. Last year, Karan Cheema, a 13-year old boy, died from a severe allergic reaction to cheese. Reports say that he was being bullied and that classmates might have flicked cheese at him or rubbed cheese on his neck. That sort of allergy bullying happens all the time. Only this weekend I saw a tweet from another worried parent whose son, aged nine, was confronted by an 11-year old threatening to throw a Snickers bar in his mouth. Two years previously, the same boy had threatened to throw peanuts at that little boy during a football session. We see more stories of allergy bullying in schools. It is far too much of a problem, and it needs to be addressed.

Schools have an important role to play in raising awareness. The spare EpiPens in schools project is positive, but more needs to be done through first aid training, health and safety training and raising awareness in schools of food allergy, and, indeed, other allergies. I hope that the Minister can give us more details about how his Department can help schools to get this right, so that children who have allergies and their classmates, are well-equipped to deal with these issues, and so that children do not feel ostracised or are bullied because they have this particular health condition.

Excellent work has been done by organisations such as Allergy UK and the Anaphylaxis Campaign, to look at how schools can improve the work that they do. Allergy UK has produced the school allergy action group toolkit, to help with awareness policies. Those efforts are to be commended. I hope that the Minister agrees with that.

In conclusion, changing people's attitudes is never easy. It requires persistence and an holistic approach across Government. We face considerable challenges in altering perceptions of allergy in the media, in the school playground, in restaurants and right across society. Incorporating allergy and anaphylaxis awareness into first aid training as part of a new-look personal, social and health and economic education would be an excellent start. Training on these issues within teacher training would also be helpful. I hope that the Minister will enlighten us further on what he and his colleagues in other Departments can do to improve this issue.

4.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) on securing this debate. I would like to thank everyone present for their contributions to this valuable discussion.

I have twins who are now 21, one of whom is asthmatic. The hon. Lady talked eloquently and passionately about her own experience, and having an anaphylactic fit is similar to an asthma attack. We also have a five-year-old. In her school, the teachers clearly do things properly. Last week at breakfast, she was planning to have her

best friend over for a play date and she said, "Daddy, my friend's got a dairy allergy, so we have to make sure we've got the right food at home." That brought home to me how complex it is, thinking about what food to give a five-year-old, to avoid what sadly happened to Karan in Ealing.

The hon. Lady spoke passionately about how the media handle this stuff. Yes, Sony has apologised, but I have looked at some of the comments linked to those media stories with people saying, "What's the big deal? This is just a cartoon—a CGI movie. Get a life!" Actually, it is about life. Sometimes we have to step back for a second and not be so selfish as to think that everybody without an allergy has the right to everything, while people with allergies should be excluded.

The hon. Lady spoke about transport. British Airways no longer provides nuts on its flights, which I think is the right thing to do. I do not have a nut allergy—I love eating nuts—but I am in no way concerned that it has taken them off the menu. Think about the number of flights, children and holidays—that is a better way of doing things, and it provides lots of other nutritious and good food.

In the short time that I have been in post as Minister for Children and Families, I have been truly inspired by the commitment shown, at all levels in the school sector, to children from a wide range of backgrounds and with a wide range of needs. I have visited early years providers and local authorities and seen the exemplary work that many of them are undertaking to support some of our most vulnerable children and members of society. Colleagues mentioned the inspection regime. Under its inspection framework, Ofsted requires inspectors to pay particular attention to children with allergies and to gather evidence about pupil welfare and how well needs are met by individual schools, and it will evaluate the experience of particular individuals and groups, including those with medical needs.

Rachael Maskell: At the moment it is completely voluntary for schools to hold an EpiPen. Will the Minister look into ensuring that all schools have such devices?

Nadhim Zahawi: Currently, governing boards have an obligation to put forward a clear strategy for what a school is doing for children with allergies. My understanding is that they have to have two EpiPens, not one—one and a spare—but I will hold a roundtable to look at what more we can do to ensure that happens in every school.¹

Our vision is that every child, no matter what their background or ability, should play an active part in their school community. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire mentioned that just because a child happens to have an allergy, they should not feel excluded from a trip, visit or any other activity at school. We want all children to reach their full potential and to receive the right support to succeed in their education and as they move into adult life. We recognise the importance of supporting pupils with medical conditions at school, and I share her concerns about instances of poor practice that have the potential to place pupils at risk.

With regards to statutory duty, in the Children and Families Act 2014 we introduced a duty on governing boards of schools in England to make arrangements to

1.[Official Report, 18 April 2018, Vol. 639, c. 1MC.]

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

support pupils with medical conditions. That is a clear signal to schools that supporting pupils with medical conditions is important. I hope that through the roundtable we can see how to improve that further.

The guidance is based on existing best practice and sets clear expectations on schools. It covers a range of areas, including the preparation and implementation of school policies for supporting pupils with medical conditions and the use of individual care plans. It also covers staff training, medicines administration, consulting with parents and collaborative working with healthcare professionals.

The Government understand that food allergies can be complex and worrying for parents. That is why we have set out minimum standards for school food through legislation, with the latest school food standards having come into force in January 2015. We expect headteachers, school governors and their caterers to make effective decisions about their school food policies that take into account the needs of all their pupils.

I want to address an issue that has not come up in the debate but is equally important. Schools have a legal requirement to offer free school meals to all pupils in reception, year 1 or year 2 whose parents want them, and we expect them to make every effort to ensure that pupils with allergies are able to benefit from that entitlement. In all but exceptional circumstances, schools and their caterers are expected to take into account factors such as the type of diet required by the child with allergies, the number of children in a similar position and the cost of making suitable foods.

Like many colleagues, I was shocked and horrified to hear about Karan, who sadly passed away. The case is under investigation, so it is difficult for me to say too much about it. However, it is important to remember that this case could have been bullying. The hon. Lady was right to condemn the messaging to young people that it is okay to tease other children over their allergies and that it is a bit of harmless fun. That is completely wrong.

In conclusion, I am grateful to the hon. Lady for highlighting this issue this afternoon. We have much to be proud of in how we have moved forward to address the medical conditions of pupils in schools, but I recognise that there may be much more that we can do. I have arranged a roundtable with the Health Conditions in Schools Alliance to discuss in detail the issues that it feels still need to be addressed, to ensure that every young person has the best opportunity to reach their full potential. I am open-minded about what will hopefully be put in front of me. I will take my learning from this debate to that roundtable and ensure that we consider the issue of allergies in the round, alongside those of other medical conditions in schools. I feel incredibly privileged to have been placed in this role. I am aware that the system often seems to be stacked against those who need more help, and I want to make sure that all vulnerable children have the support to achieve in school and to progress successfully into adulthood.

Question put and agreed to.

Labour Reforms: Qatar

4.29 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered labour reforms in Qatar.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Sir Christopher. It is no secret that I am a trade unionist—I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, should they wish to know more. I believe that participating in a trade union is an act of solidarity and that acting collectively strengthens the individual and the whole.

When I recruit members, I use a common analogy about sticks: one stick can easily be snapped, but it is harder to snap 10 sticks bunched together, and harder still to snap 1,000. That applies at home, when we back University and College Union members engaged in industrial action, and across the world. Our movement is international. The location and the industry may change, but we still have a responsibility to stand up for one another.

I secured this debate in that vein. Qatar might seem a long way from the north side of Nottingham, but we know that workers have struggled and even died there. I feel a responsibility to use my privileged position in this place to highlight that. In doing so, I follow other hon. Members who have done similar or who have visited, and Unite the Union, which has made it an issue of national interest thanks to its terrific efforts.

I will give a potted history of workers' conditions in Qatar, talk about the challenges that workers face there, talk about the positive reforms put in place by the Qatari Government, and look to the future. I will not give a pious homily. In my experience, they rarely work—and I am not very good at them. Whether it is trying to persuade my neighbours to make better health decisions, or trying to persuade international Governments about workers' conditions, I find that wagging my finger is rarely the best way to do it. Instead, I intend to be clear about the problems, to recognise the progress made and to be practical about the future.

Qatar has changed dramatically in the last 20 years. In a 15-year period from the late '90s, the GDP per capita almost tripled thanks to its natural assets. The CIA's factbook estimates that Qatar is the second-richest country in the world by GDP per capita. Alongside that significant change, there has been an obvious effort to put the country on the world map. Infrastructure development has been the No. 1 priority, with the Government planning to spend more than 47% of the national budget on major infrastructure projects this year. Of course, that is best highlighted by the coming 2022 World cup.

Qatar is a rapidly changing country. Change at that pace requires wholesale building, which in turn requires lots and lots of labour, and, inevitably, migrant workers. That can be a good thing if workers can secure high-quality, properly paid jobs with decent working conditions—indeed, workers from 183 countries sent home over £11 billion in 2016—but it can be a bad thing if the treatment of human beings is not a priority and if the project comes first, rather than the individual's interest. That is what we are discussing today.

The award of the World cup seems a reasonable place to start. In 2010, when Russia and Qatar secured the 2018 and 2022 World cups respectively, those decisions were controversial, and they continue to be so for many reasons. However, we do not often talk about the important, intangible benefits that the World cup can bring. The 2018 World cup will be the first hosted in eastern Europe, and the 2022 World cup will be the first hosted in the middle east, and only the second in Asia. Prior to that, other than when it was in South Africa in 2010, the global tournament has been anything but global.

The World cup, and other mega-sporting events, is an incredible way to bring people of different nationalities and cultures together to bond over a simple shared love, especially in difficult times. Qatar's World cup will allow people to learn first hand about the Arab world—and vice versa—who might not have done so otherwise.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I draw hon. Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I travelled to Qatar last month. Migrant workers are involved in building infrastructure and stadiums for the forthcoming World cup in 2022, and a lot of those stadiums will be sent to third-world countries and developing countries in places such as Africa after the World cup, so that children there can benefit from that infrastructure as well. Does my hon. Friend share my enthusiasm for that?

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful intervention, which I completely agree with. I will talk about legacy shortly.

I feel strongly about this issue, and I co-chair the newly formed all-party parliamentary group on sport, modern slavery and human rights, which focuses on mega-sporting events and their impact on host communities, as my hon. Friend talked about. Growing up in Manchester, I saw at first hand the transformation that the Commonwealth games had on the city. We should hope to see that sort of legacy from all these events. I encourage hon. Members to come to the all-party group's events—we have one on Monday—if they wish to participate further in that.

Qatar's population followed its economy in increasing, from just under 600,000 at the turn of the millennium to around 2.6 million today. Most of that increase comes from migration, with 88% of the population made up of migrants from countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh and the Philippines. That has worked well for the Government and for business owners, but for the workers, conditions have often been dire. Although the acquisition of the World cup brought global attention and pressure, workers' conditions are still not at a standard that we would expect for ourselves. As we talk about the positive developments, we have to bear that in mind. We must continue to press for improvement.

Until 2016, the kafala system was at the root of the problem. All unskilled migrant workers were subject to it, as they are in much of the middle east. The system linked workers to an in-country sponsor, who was responsible for their visa and legal status. It was described by Amnesty International as a system that “facilitates forced labour and a range of other abuses.”

As the home of football, we would not want that tied to the beautiful game. In 2014, four years after the successful World cup bid, that was just one of nine exploitation issues that Amnesty highlighted for urgent reform.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I also direct hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, because I travelled to Qatar last month. When I visited, I was pleased to hear about the improvements made to workers' rights and labour reforms. The International Labour Organisation has stated that workers “enjoy better protection” and has agreed to open an office to oversee the reforms. What more can the UK do to support Qatar in that process?

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend for that constructive intervention and for her insights. At the end I will come to, not necessarily what more can be done, but a list of the current plans, which we must support. On paper they are very good, and if we can make the reality match the rhetoric, something good indeed will have happened, but I will talk about the background first, so we understand the context.

The other issues that Amnesty highlighted were the exit permit system, which allows employers to stop workers leaving the country, the lack of protection for domestic workers in labour law, and the late or non-payment of wages to migrant workers.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I visited Qatar on a delegation in 2014, and I was appalled by the workers' poor living and working conditions. My hon. Friend is helpfully setting out some of the concerns. My understanding is that some things have improved since 2014, but there is still the routine non-payment of wages, and agencies in the sending country give false expectations about salaries and charge exorbitant fees. Although conditions might have improved on World cup stadium sites, health and safety on other construction sites is still very poor. How can those things be improved?

Alex Norris: It is important to remember that although the World cup will get the most focus, because of its global interest, it does not make up the majority of construction. There is a lot of development going on, and we must look at those other developments to ensure that the positive changes from the World cup are extended. It is no coincidence that when my hon. Friend and others went on their delegations, things started to get better. That is why I wanted to secure the debate.

Paula Sherriff: It is clear that significant improvements have been made to workers' rights in Qatar, hopefully with more to come. Does my hon. Friend agree that many other countries in the region, including in the Gulf, need to mirror those improvements? Clearly, Qatar is leading the way in the region.

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend has slightly tipped off my grand finale, because the important point is that what is secured and achieved in Qatar needs to spread out to neighbouring countries that still have that relationship to the kafala system. If we do that, we will have secured something in this struggle.

The last couple of issues that Amnesty highlighted were harsh and dangerous working conditions, obstacles to access to justice, the denial of the right to form a trade union—something very basic and fundamental to us in this country—and the failed enforcement of existing labour standards. Many of those issues have now been

[Alex Norris]

addressed and further action is on the horizon, as I shall set out shortly. However, it is worth understanding what they mean, which is that workers are dying. Only last year, a British man from Hove, Zachary Cox, fell to his death when his safety harness failed.

It has been a real challenge—perhaps Ministers can support us in this venture—to get good information on how many people have lost their lives as a result of labour exploitation. Lots of numbers are floating around, but the death toll is certainly in four figures. The *Washington Post* said that 1,200 had died in construction on World cup sites alone. That claim has since been picked apart a little, but we know that the real figure is an awful one that will continue to grow unless the change that we must support happens. We have responsibilities, and I certainly feel a responsibility to use this privileged place to talk about the issue.

In December 2016, in response to the outrage about the kafala system and the need to change it, the Qatari Government passed what is known as Law No. 21. It offered many reforms; the Qatari Government said that it would strike a fine balance between the rights of workers, Qatari culture and the needs of Qatari business, promising sweeping and significant reform. However, the view on the ground was that that had not happened. The situation has developed since, but the context is important. Human rights groups have pointed out that the law did not address the power of employers over workers, exit permits or passport confiscations. Some of the changes were a little cosmetic.

Three areas in particular need to be revisited: sponsorship reform, exit permits and passport confiscation. Under Law No. 21, the two-year ban on re-entering Qatar after leaving an employer was replaced with a stay tied to the duration of a contract. That grants a little more freedom but still leaves workers unable to move jobs during a contract, so the protections are not very strong.

With respect to exit permits, workers were required under the 2009 sponsorship law to have express permission from their employers in order to leave the country. That violated the universal declaration of human rights, the international convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination, and the Arab charter on human rights—all of which Qatar is a signatory to. The Qatari Government has said that under the new law, “freedom of movement is explicitly guaranteed”.

However, Amnesty International has said that, “their employers will still be able to stop them going home.”

As per the UN special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, the exit permit system applies to few, if any, migrant workers, and

“does not justify the pre-emptive punishment of thousands.”

Again, we need to look at that.

Passport confiscation used to be illegal in Qatar and could result in a fine, although in practice it rarely did. Employers are now permitted to confiscate passports, although there is a potential fine for breach of conditions. Amnesty International has raised concerns about that.

I do not think the new law reaches the level of sweeping and significant reform, and there is clearly much to do. However, significant progress has been reported, and it is important that we acknowledge it, as hon. Members have done. We need to give the Qatari

Government the credit they deserve and, hopefully, support them in going all the way. Significantly and helpfully, the UN International Labour Organisation, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) referred to, has agreed to partner with the Qatari Government to implement true reforms. The Qatari ambassador to the UK has assured me that those reforms will “strengthen protections” for the

“expatriate community, so that their freedom and rights are secure.”

Again, we will be very interested to see them.

Another measure that the Qatari Government are trying to introduce is the implementation of a wage protection system, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) said, which would require wages for workers to be paid locally. The ILO describes the system as

“a positive measure which, if implemented effectively, could contribute to addressing the recurring issue of the non-payment...of wages.”

Yet another measure is the introduction of a temporary minimum wage—a matter that we in this country feel very strongly about—while an assessment is carried out to determine a fixed minimum wage. Workers must also receive accommodation, food and healthcare from their employers, but again, it is important that we ensure that that happens across all development, as well as on World cup sites.

The domestic workers law sets out several rights for workers, including the right to terminate employment, along with provisions on holidays, end-of-service bonuses, improved access to justice and penalties for violations. Construction of brand-new accommodation for workers is ongoing, and I know that visiting delegations have shown a real interest in it. A national committee for combating human trafficking has been established. Bilateral agreements have been reached, and other work has been done with origin countries to combat the issue at source, including licensing of recruitment agencies. There has also been increased inspection and enforcement of housing and working conditions.

These are good reforms that would make things better for a lot of people, so it is really important that they are followed through. I spoke to Amnesty only this morning, and its response is still a little mixed, especially with respect to sponsorship, so it is clearly an issue to look into further. I am delighted that the Qatari Government have asked to meet me, and I will raise all these points with them. I believe we have a duty—I certainly feel a personal duty—to keep asking questions and asking for evidence to ensure that the reforms are delivered.

Amnesty, Unite and Caabu—the Council for Arab-British Understanding—have all supported me in identifying plenty of issues that need to be resolved. They have made it clear that there has been an obvious difference and that action has been taken. Other organisations have given similar praise. The general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation, Sharan Burrow, has praised

“the start of real reforms in Qatar which will bring to an end the use of modern slavery and puts the country on the pathway to meeting its international legal obligations on workers’ rights”.

There is a real prize here. I slightly buried the lede when I answered the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), but if pressure

and improvements in Qatar mean that standards are pushed up across the region—in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Oman and Bahrain—we will have achieved something really important. It will all have started from the visits and the interest of Unite and others. By going there, going into cupboards and looking at security harnesses in the way that trade unionists do, they will have achieved something exceptional on a regional scale.

I thank my friends at Amnesty, Caabu and Unite for helping to develop my work in the area and helping me with this debate. As a result of their efforts, lives will be saved and improved. I know that they will be keen to stay the course to ensure that the reality matches the rhetoric. I will certainly do my bit.

I have gone through quite a lot of the timeline, but the most important part is still to come. It is important that we recognise the progress that has been made, but in the spirit of friendship and, most importantly, solidarity with Qatari workers, we need to press for more—to press for the job to be finished. We must offer whatever co-operation we can to support that. I am looking forward to a 22-year-old Phil Foden leading England to World cup glory in 2022—he will probably be Manchester City captain by then.

Gill Furniss: Never going to happen.

Alex Norris: It is certainly going to happen. More importantly, I hope that, long before then, we will see a Qatar in which 1.7 million workers have the rights and protections that they deserve.

4.46 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) on securing it and on setting the scene so comprehensively.

I have been a massive football fan all my life. For those who do not know, I am a Leicester City supporter and have been for 48 years, since long before they won the premier league—we never used to have much to celebrate. I am interested in football and obviously I am interested in Qatar, which will host the 2022 World cup. I wait for each World cup with great anticipation. We do not see as much of them as we would like to, but watching them is something to enjoy with family and friends—there is a real buzz about it. Sadly, unlike some people, I have never been able to predict exactly which country will win each group and which will ultimately win the cup, but I always hope that it will be one of the home nations. That is what I look forward to.

In the build-up to the 2022 World cup, however, joy has turned to shock because of the alleged treatment of the workers who are building the stadiums and facilities. I do not think the hon. Gentleman cited a figure, but some newspapers say that more than 1,200 people have so far died while building the stadiums and facilities. Although we are in no way responsible for health and safety executives around the world, I believe we have an international obligation to ensure that in an event that hosts our football teams, the competition is carried out to an adequate standard.

A BBC article states:

“Living and working conditions for some migrants in Qatar are appalling. Long hours in the blazing heat, low pay and squalid dormitories, are a daily ordeal for thousands—and they cannot leave without an exit visa... And many workers have died.”

The article cites

“a report by the International Trades Union Confederation, called The Case Against Qatar. The ITUC went to the embassies of Nepal and India, two countries which are the source of many of the migrant workers who go to Qatar”,

although not all of them. It continues:

“Those embassies had counted more than 400 deaths a year between them—a total of 1,239 deaths in the three years to the end of 2013.”

On Tuesday, I watched an exposé on the morning news about Qatar, obesity and the rise of diabetes. It has been said that the World cup will bring lots of opportunities for sport, and the people of Qatar have been encouraged to get involved in sport to reduce diabetes. That is Qatar's plan, but this debate is about what is happening to the workers, which is shocking. It is past time that labour relations were brought up to an acceptable standard. The building industry is obviously building more than World cup-related facilities, but the fact that construction is part of the strategy to provide infrastructure to host the games means that we have some level of obligation. That is why we are here today; I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham North on setting the scene and on giving us the opportunity to participate in the debate.

Reforms have been proposed, including setting a minimum wage and allowing workers to leave the country without their employer's permission by using exit visas. There now seems to be a willingness to continue to make improvements and we welcome that; it is a step in the right direction. It is also necessary, and we must do our part through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and UN representatives, to ensure that this process continues, for the sake of all those who leave their home to provide a living for their family but face the possibility of not returning home.

Those who come from Nepal, Tibet or other countries are not heading off to war; they are heading off to a building site and therefore they expect to come home. And whenever 1,239 workers do not return home, you know something? We ask questions and I believe this House has a responsibility to ask those questions through our Minister and our Government.

To conclude, I am pleased that some reforms have been made, but I urge our Minister, given the position and the power that he has, to put some pressure on Qatar to ensure that the reforms are carried through and go further. We must do what we can to increase the diplomatic pressure, to see changes for the better. Our Minister is very active; he is very responsive to debates such as this one. I look to him and to the Government to provide the response that we want to see.

I will not be going to the World cup in Qatar—I would probably be unable to, even if Northern Ireland qualify—but I am concerned for the workers there and that is what this debate is about. I urge our Minister and our Government to do all they can to ensure that those workers are safe and have the facilities, conditions and health conditions that we have here. They should have those things in Qatar; let us make sure that they do.

4.51 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), not just on obtaining the debate but because it is, as he rightly said, on a very important issue. I also congratulate him on the way in which he presented the arguments, which I thought was exceptionally fair and even-handed.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there is little to be served by our standing here in Westminster delivering pious sermons, not least because although we have within our own legal systems good standards of labour rights, they are not universal and they are not always applied. I think back, during my time in this House, to the tragic deaths of the cockle pickers on Morecambe Bay. I am the MP for Orkney and Shetland, so I have very close links to the fishing industry. I know that some truly appalling incidents have been reported of migrant crews from outside the European economic area and the conditions in which they have worked in our own country in recent years. So we must approach this subject with a bit of humility, and that is exactly what the hon. Gentleman did.

I should also declare an interest, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary British-Qatar group. Twice in recent years I have visited Qatar; it is outlined in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I say to the hon. Gentleman and to all others in the Chamber that they are most welcome to engage with the all-party group. We have regular contact with the Qatari embassy here and I have also made it my business to engage with human rights non-governmental organisations that are working in the region. The last visit to Qatar that I was part of was in February 2017. We were hosted by the British embassy in Doha and we met a number of the human rights NGOs and other campaigning organisations working in the region.

We have challenged the Qataris on many occasions in relation to the matters that the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is from the Democratic Unionist party, have raised. There is no point in pulling our punches; we add no value if we stand here as apologists, or as people explaining the inadequacies in the systems that we find in other countries. However, I say to the House that on all the occasions when we have raised, tackled and quite robustly put to the Qataris the shortcomings that have been identified, I have always found in them a willingness to engage, and as we have seen in recent years, that engagement has resulted in significant progress.

In particular, in entering into the three-year programme of technical co-operation with the International Labour Organisation, Qatar has done something that I hope will produce the sort of change within the system that we all want to see. We have already seen the abolition of the kafala system and the introduction of a temporary minimum wage, as the hon. Member for Nottingham North said.

Most importantly, from my experience of engaging with the Qatari Government I am encouraged by the establishment of the national committee for combating human trafficking. I say that because I have engaged in recent times with the National Human Rights Committee in Qatar, which is a body set up by the Government but independent of the Government. If the committee for combating human trafficking is allowed and able to

operate in the same way as the human rights committee does, I suggest that there is significant opportunity for making the sort of progress that we want to see in Qatar.

It is almost a heresy for a Scotsman to say this, but I am absolutely indifferent on the subject of football. The World cup holds little joy for me, or indeed probably—in all sincerity—for many Scotsmen when it comes to the subject of our own national team's prospects. However, I have always been quite struck by the vision that underpins the idea of the first Arab World cup. It is a quite remarkable vision that Qatar has. If Qatar is to justify it, and do it justice, it will have to come up to the mark on labour rights and other human rights.

That gives the Qataris a real opportunity. With every major sporting occasion, we always speak about a legacy. It is my sincere hope, and it is an aspiration that I know is shared by many in Qatar itself, that the legacy of the 2022 World cup may be that the standard of labour rights and human rights, which will bear scrutiny in the future, will mean that the recent history of Qatar that we have seen—the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) witnessed it for herself—will genuinely be consigned to history.

4.57 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Thank you, Sir Christopher, for giving me the opportunity to speak, and I also thank the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) for securing this debate. There have been many jokes about the World cup, but I am looking forward to 2022, when Scotland are victorious in the final against England.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I am a proud member of that international organisation called the trade union movement. I think there were three key themes in his contribution: what is happening; what we can do to promote sustainable development and the fight against poverty, injustice and inequality internationally; and what we can do to promote best practice here in the United Kingdom.

Those are certainly the themes that I want to pick up, because, as the hon. Gentleman said, in October last year the Government in Qatar committed to reforms to improve significantly the physical and employment situation of 2 million migrant workers, including ending the kafala system, which has already been referred to and which the International Trade Union Confederation had described as modern slavery. Those concessions by the Qatari Government were reported by state media and announced just before the International Labour Organisation was due to decide whether to hold a formal commission of inquiry into conditions in Qatar for migrant workers.

The human rights abuses that we have seen—workers being tied to a single employer, low pay, poor accommodation, labouring in dangerous heat and, sadly, hundreds of unexplained deaths—have been subject to intense global scrutiny and criticism. Foreign workers can only come to the Arab Gulf states through a sponsor, as the hon. Gentleman said. However, the essence of that kafala system was the relationship binding the employee to the employer, which has often been criticised as being like slavery, because the employer could dictate the recruitment process and working conditions, while workers were often forced to pay their own medical insurance fees and surrender their passports and identification papers.

Much work has been done, not only here but in the Scottish Parliament, in relation to how we can make a contribution to sustainable development and the fight against poverty, injustice and inequality internationally. Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, pledged to implement the global goals and made a dual commitment to tackle poverty and inequality at home in Scotland and to help developing countries grow in a fair and sustainable manner. Our commitment to contribute internationally to the global goals must reflect and mirror our domestic aims and ambitions for Scotland. That includes building the economy; tackling poverty and inequality; providing quality healthcare and education; promoting affordable and clean energy; and ensuring a sustainable environment. I am sure that we all want to play our part in contributing to the development of our partner countries through those global goals.

The international framework and international development strategy agreed in the Scottish Parliament have set the direction for Scotland's international activity. It sets out the priorities that will contribute to Scotland's ongoing ambition to be a good global citizen continuing to make distinctive contributions in addressing global challenges. We should recognise that businesses have a crucial role to play in preventing and remedying breaches of human rights. Although states, rather than the private sector, have the principal responsibility for respecting and protecting human rights, we can encourage businesses to take positive action, for example by actively managing the risk of being party to human rights abuses. Businesses can exert a direct influence through their trade and investment decisions.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) rightly raised the issue of trafficking and exploitation. In Scotland, a strategy was adopted in May last year that was agreed by Police Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. That is an important strategy. A number of case studies were produced to show what human trafficking involved and the impact it had on victims. A number of people who had been subjected to human trafficking played their part in developing that strategy.

To conclude, the hon. Member for Nottingham North said that we should promote best practice at home. There are some areas where the UK can help. It can certainly help by looking at how to provide better workplace protection for people in the gig economy. I ask the Government to look seriously at my Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill, which seeks to do that. We certainly need to look at parts of our economy where there are exploitative zero-hours contracts. We need to show that we in the UK lead by example when it comes to workers' rights and human rights across the globe.

5.2 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) on introducing this debate. He is well known on the Labour Benches and, I think, throughout the House for his defence of trade union rights and for his trade union background. He has a brilliant record on that, and he is now bringing those skills and that knowledge to the House, where he is promoting the rights of union members, trade unions and workers.

In my hon. Friend's introductory speech, he said that the treatment of workers must be a priority, and that is where we are starting from this afternoon. He talked about the benefits of holding the World cup finals outside Europe for the first time, and I agree with him on that, although like the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) I am no great football fan. Clearly, it will benefit football, the people of that region and all who take part in the competition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North said that workers' conditions are not what we would accept in the United Kingdom, and I totally agree with him. That is why we are having this debate. He said that it is the responsibility of MPs to draw attention to abuses in places such as Qatar, and that is exactly what he has done so well this afternoon. He concluded his speech by saying that lives will be saved and improved, and we have to recognise the progress that has been made, although there is much still to be done.

My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I hope he does not mind me calling him my hon. Friend, but every time I speak in this place, he is there making a contribution, and we have got to know each other well over the years—pointed to the level of obligation we have in this place to draw attention to workers' rights in Qatar because it is hosting the World cup. He said his concern is for the workers, and I certainly agree with him.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland said that we need to approach this subject with some humility because perhaps we are not perfect here in the United Kingdom, and of course he is right. He is the chair of the all-party parliamentary British-Qatar group. He pointed out that although he is indifferent to the World cup itself, Qatar is important to him. I will certainly take up his offer to attend some of the meetings of the all-party group.

As we have heard today, Qatar is home to 1.7 million migrant workers as of 2015. Some 40% of those workers are employed in the construction sector. I hate to quote the *Daily Mail*, but I will, because in 2015 it highlighted the lack of a minimum wage, with some workers, such as carpenters, paid as little as 56p an hour. That is disgraceful. By 2017, more than 1,200 migrant workers had been killed in Qatar in the construction industry and other industries and trades since it was awarded the 2022 World cup finals. Many are still working on building sites in potentially life-threatening heat and humidity. Ultimately, the Government of Qatar are responsible for the human rights abuses occurring there. That is what Amnesty International said in 2017. Qatar began implementing reforms to migrant workers' rights to head off a potentially embarrassing inquiry by the International Labour Organisation before the 2022 World cup.

Following international criticism, Qatar agreed in 2014 to bring in reforms including a minimum wage and reform to the kafala system, about which we have heard a great deal this afternoon. I will not add to what has been said about that, but I draw Members' attention to some of the abuses that workers have had to suffer. Contractors withhold workers' passport and personal documents so they cannot leave the country. Workers need permission from their employer to leave Qatar. Workers are often housed in unsanitary camps, sleeping in small dormitory rooms, some with more than 20 people to a room—imagine that. Employers have refused

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

permission for any form of inspection of those facilities. Many workers are paid less than £1 an hour. While Qatar may have a cheaper cost of living than the UK, it is not that much cheaper. We often hear that domestic violence is common in those conditions.

I am told that Qatar is spending \$500 million a week on World cup-related infrastructure projects, including the construction or restoration of eight stadiums, hotels, transportation and other facilities. FIFA, the international football organisation, has stated that it

“seeks to prevent or mitigate adverse human rights impacts” in relation to World cup projects.

Many Members will know that in the past nine months there has been a blockade of Qatar by some of its neighbours: Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and, most importantly, Saudi Arabia. When I visited the country in February, I was told that that has acted as a catalyst to increase the pace and speed of reforms. Whether that is true or not, only time will tell.

In August 2017, the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamin bin Hamad Al Thani, ratified Law No. 15 on service workers working in the home. It is the first law that grants labour protections for Qatar’s 175,000 domestic workers, and we must not forget them. In talking about construction, let us not forget domestic workers, who often receive far more abuse than even those on construction sites. Under the law, employers would not be allowed to withhold personal documents. However, migrant workers would continue to require permission to leave the country, as they would be required to notify their employer, and I guess permission could be withheld.

When I was in Qatar I had the privilege of meeting Ambassador Faisal bin Abdullah Al-Henzab, who is the director of the human rights department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He speaks extremely good English, having represented his country in many parts of the world including, most recently, Geneva. He told me that the International Labour Organisation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North pointed out, finished its inquiry in November 2017, in response to the Qatar Government’s expressed reform commitments and legislative actions. ILO director general, Guy Ryder, said:

“The ILO welcomes the commitment of Qatar to engage in substantive cooperation with the Organization for the promotion and protection of workers’ rights, and looks forward to the successful implementation of the cooperation programme over the next three years”.

The United Kingdom ambassador to Qatar in Doha, Ajay Sharma, confirmed that the pace of reform is speeding up, partly in response to the boycott and the crisis, as the Qataris call it. Of course, we warmly welcome that.

We believe that the labour reforms are a positive result of international pressure on Qatar, as many Members have pointed out, including the mover of this afternoon’s motion. Human Rights Watch called them

“a step in the right direction”,

but highlighted the fact that

“their implementation will be the decisive factor”.

The ILO report that I mentioned earlier is also a little vague. For example, it states that a minimum wage will be adopted by Qatar without stipulating when, what it

will be, and how it will be enforced. Qatar remains unique among its peers in the Gulf for implementing the ILO recommendations, but as Amnesty International said, the ILO and the international community “must continue to scrutinise Qatar’s record on migrant labour abuse”.

As has been said this afternoon, the reforms are warmly welcomed, but much more needs to be done. We will be watching, encouraging and—I hope—helping the Government of Qatar to implement those reforms so that they can lead the region. Perhaps other countries in the region will follow.

5.11 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I genuinely thank the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) for securing today’s debate. On behalf of the entire House, I wish the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) a very happy birthday. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East is currently elsewhere on ministerial duties, so it is my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government.

Working conditions in other countries obviously matter to us—not just for their own sake, but to give British workers employed in other countries confidence that they will be properly protected. The tragic death of Zachary Cox in Qatar last year has once again focused public attention on the working conditions there, particularly in the construction industry. May I, as I am sure we all do, extend sincere condolences once again to his family?

I would like to set out what the main concerns about labour conditions in Qatar have been, what steps the Qatari Government have been taking to address them, and what the UK Government have been doing to support reforms there. Public attention, as has been mentioned, was drawn to the working conditions in Qatar, and particularly the conditions endured by the mainly migrant workforce on construction sites, when Qatar won the competition to host the 2022 football World cup just over seven years ago. It would be wise of me to say nothing about my own enthusiasm for football or, if I were to be honest, lack of it.

In 2014, the International Labour Organisation raised a complaint against Qatar concerning the non-observance of the forced labour convention. As we have heard today, the ILO had particular concerns about the kafala, an Arabic term meaning, essentially, “sponsorship system”. The kafala gives responsibility for migrant workers’ visas and legal status to their sponsors in many Gulf countries. The practice has been widely criticised by human rights organisations because of concerns that it could leave workers open to exploitation. We believe that there are clear examples where that has definitely been the case. There have been reports that more than one million migrant workers in Qatar might be subject to kafala.

Following the ILO complaint, the Qatari Ministry of Labour committed to a number of reforms, including introducing laws to end the kafala. The Ministry also undertook to take other steps that go beyond the minimum required to address the ILO’s concerns. As well as changes to legislation to address the kafala system, the Ministry has made a number of specific commitments, which include addressing three main concerns. First, it

has committed to improve health screening and access to healthcare for migrant workers. Secondly, it has committed to introduce a minimum wage. Thirdly, it has committed to establish a fund to help workers with their salaries in the event that an employer goes bankrupt.

In addition to those commitments, the Qataris have reformed the process for migrant workers leaving the country, and introduced an electronic wage payment scheme. They have also built new accommodation for the foreign labour force, and increased their health and safety inspection capability. Qatar has also introduced legislation to offer legal protection to domestic workers, and has made efforts to improve recruitment practices in workers' countries of origin. That means that employers should in future hire only through independently monitored and licensed recruiting agents, and the Ministry of Labour must approve all contracts. That will help to avoid problems with the misrepresentation of contracts and salaries, and to end the high recruitment fees being charged by unscrupulous agents, as has happened previously.

Qatar has taken other practical steps to improve the situation for migrant workers. The supreme committee for delivery and legacy for the World cup has been working with a number of international companies and agencies to carry out regular audits and inspections of construction sites. It signed a memorandum of understanding with the Building and Wood Workers' International union—the BWI—18 months ago, and has been conducting joint worksite inspections with the BWI, to assess standards for construction workers involved in all World cup projects. The committee is also inspecting the accommodation provided for the workers, to ensure that it is fit for them to live in.

The supreme committee and the BWI published their first report in January, which set out a number of observations and recommendations to improve safety standards further. Those recommendations include sharing health records between accommodation and work sites, improving standards in kitchen areas, and trying to prevent workplace injuries. It is clearly vital that all those recommendations are implemented as soon as possible, not least because the number of workers on World cup and associated infrastructure construction projects is likely to reach its peak of almost 2 million later this year.

Jim Shannon: The programme that was on TV the other morning referred to Qatar's having one of the highest levels of income per head in the whole of the Arab world. There really should not be any financial reasons for not doing all the work that the Minister has pointed out. Does he agree that, given the finance that they have available, they should just get the job done?

Sir Alan Duncan: As we are discussing today, we want to see high standards, fair pay, and all the guarantees around those two structures, to ensure that people are not exploited and cheated, which appears to have been the case on a number of occasions in the past.

Qatar's efforts to improve the situation for its migrant workforce have recently been welcomed by the ILO, Human Rights Watch and the International Trade Union Confederation. In fact, in November the ILO decided to close its complaint, in recognition of the progress being made by Qatar to address its concerns. Last October, Qatar and the ILO signed a technical co-operation

agreement, which aims to bring Qatar's labour laws in line with international standards. The agreement will last three years. During that time, an ILO office based in Doha will provide support and monitor progress on reforming labour rights and ending forced labour. That will include further work to improve the working and living conditions for construction workers, ensuring that workers have a voice through an improved grievance system, and tackling issues in recruitment. ILO staff are already working in Qatar ahead of the formal opening of the office in April.

The UK Government are committed to the UN guiding principles on business and human rights, so we welcome the commitments and efforts being made by Qatar. Modern slavery is a particular priority for my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and she has discussed the issue in detail with His Highness the Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.

The Qataris have shown a willingness to improve workers' human rights. Last September, Qatar endorsed the Prime Minister's call to action at the UN General Assembly to end modern slavery. The UK's close bilateral relationship with Qatar has allowed us not only to raise concerns about working conditions and human rights, but to offer our assistance and expertise. The UK's recent experience of hosting the Olympics, the Commonwealth games and the rugby world cup means that we have the expertise to help Qatar stage a safe and successful World cup in 2022. That includes improving health and safety on construction sites, as well as designing world-class stadiums and providing British expertise to keep the stadiums cool. We will continue to work with Qatar on labour reform and other issues, such as supporting its 2030 national vision—its ambitious vision to transform and diversify its economy away from the hydrocarbons sector.

Later this month, the Minister for the Middle East will travel to Qatar for talks on strengthening our relationship and to discuss what more we can do to help implement the national vision. At the same time, our embassy in Doha will continue to urge the British business community in Qatar, as well as its contractors and subcontractors, to adhere to the toughest health and safety standards. Our embassy staff have seen at first hand the positive steps that have been taken by Qatar over the past year to improve construction safety standards as well as the wider situation for migrant workers in the country. We will continue to encourage those measures and to follow the significant progress made by the Qatari authorities.

Although a number of challenges remain, we are encouraged by Qatar's clear commitment to improving the labour conditions of migrant workers. For our part, the UK firmly believes that prosperity and respect for human rights should go hand in hand. We welcome Qatar's willingness to introduce reforms that will bring their laws into line with international standards. We will continue to work with Qatar to support progress and reform, to give all workers in Qatar confidence to know that their safety, their wellbeing, and their rights will be properly protected.

5.22 pm

Alex Norris: I am still a relatively new Member and this is my first hour-long Westminster Hall debate. A few minutes ago, I had the moment that new Members

[Alex Norris]

often have, when I realised I would get the chance, and the obligation, to sum up. Happily, I keep good notes and I am light on my feet, so I suspect I will be able to do so briefly.

My previous two debates were on advice services in Nottingham and voter registration in Nottingham North. They were much more solo ventures than today's debate, and it has been lovely to have some company. I was slightly thrown because I was expecting the Minister for the Middle East, but I was very excited to see the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) in his place as Minister, because he and I have spent quite a bit of time in the last few weeks on the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill Committee. This gives me another chance to remind him of our enthusiasm for the passing of a Magnitsky-type amendment to that Bill on Report.

Sir Alan Duncan: I would draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the commitment made by the Prime Minister in a statement today to table such an amendment, and assure the House that I am working very closely with his party in the hope that we can have a cross-party agreement on that that will give a strong voice from the United Kingdom, particularly given the background of Salisbury.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I call Alex Norris, on the subject of the debate.

Alex Norris: I thank the Minister for that, but will return to topic.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) put it very aptly when he said that these migrant workers are not going to war but going to work. They are going to a building site and it should be held in that spirit. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for his leadership through the all-party parliamentary group. It is really important to recognise, as many Members have said, that things

have got better because people have looked at this, have taken part and have gone and taken time to have difficult conversations. That is how things get better.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) is, like me, a strong trade unionist and an internationalist. He gave us some timely reminders of the challenge at home. I saw him speak last week at an event for his old union, so I am in no doubt that he will press the case strongly.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for his comprehensive speech. It was quite reassuring that our speeches fitted together, so I clearly was not too far off beam. It was really clear about the sort of pressure that we can bring as a country, how we can help raise standards and the impact that that might have in the broader region, which is, as I said earlier, a real prize.

I am grateful to the Minister for talking us through the Government's position and the connection to modern-day slavery, which is an issue on which Members across the House hold strong opinions.

I appreciate the spirit in which we discussed the issue. I will confess that I was having a couple of beers with a couple of mates last night, watching the football. When I said I was having this debate, they said, "You just want to talk about football, don't you, Alex?" I do love football—I seem to have got all the enthusiasm from those Members who do not, and combined it in me—but this is not actually about football. It is not about the World cup. That is an emblem of the issue, but it is about people, workers and being able to go to work with the expectation of getting fair pay, getting paid and being safe—something we would all want for ourselves, our friends and our family, and that we should want for everyone around the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered labour reforms in Qatar.

5.25 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 14 March 2018

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards and Mental Capacity

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Subject to the written ministerial statement HCWS202 made on 30 October 2017, I am today announcing the publication of the Government's final response to the Law Commission's report on mental capacity and deprivation of liberty safeguards (DoLS), a copy of which is attached.

I welcome the publication of the Law Commission's report and thank them for their careful, comprehensive and considered work. This Government are committed to take action to reform mental health, and transform care for people with learning difficulties and/or autism. Taking action to reform the current DoLS regime is an important contribution towards achieving these aims and providing greater protection for some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

We have set out in detail our provisional view of each individual proposal in our response, and we broadly agree with the liberty protection safeguards model. As the Government have commissioned a review into the Mental Health Act, proposals that relate to the interface between the Mental Health Act and Mental Capacity Act will be considered as part of that review. We also want to ensure that liberty protection safeguards fit with the conditions and future direction of the health and social care sector, so we will continue to work through the detail of the recommendations and engage further with stakeholders particularly on implementation. We will bring forward legislation to implement the model when parliamentary time allows.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-03-14/HCWS542/>

[HCWS542]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Communities Policy Update

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The Government's manifesto said they would bring forward a new integration strategy to help people in more isolated communities to engage with the wider world, help women in particular into the workplace, and teach more people to learn English.

The "Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper", published today, sets out the Government's ambitious proposals to build strong, integrated communities where people—whatever their background—live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities.

This strategy is for England and the majority of the policy proposals set out in this Green Paper are in areas where responsibility is devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There are some proposals on the immigration system, which are reserved matters.

The consultation will run from 14 March until 5 June 2018.

Copies of the Green Paper will be placed in the Library of the House and are available on the Government's website:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/integrated-communities-strategy-green-paper>

An oral statement will be delivered to both Houses later today.

[HCWS543]

Petition

Wednesday 14 March 2018

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

School budgets

The petition of residents of Keighley and Ilkley,

Declares that the cuts in spending to school budgets in Craven Ward, in the constituency of Keighley and Ilkley,

will lead to further staff redundancies, increasing class sizes, reductions in the range of subjects on offer and a decline in educational standards.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reverse the cuts that have been made to school budgets in Craven, further to protect per pupil funding in real terms in the schools of Craven over the lifetime of this Parliament, and further to ensure no school loses out in real terms as a result of any new funding formula.

And the petitioners remain etc.—[*Presented by John Grogan.*]

[P002119]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 14 March 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	843	WALES—continued	
Engagements	843	Investment in the Railway Network	842
WALES	833	Rail Electrification: Swansea	837
European Union (Withdrawal) Bill	840	Severn Growth Summit	833
Industrial Strategy: Cross-Border Working	841	Steel Industry	839
		Welsh EU Continuity Bill	834

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 14 March 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	41WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL	
Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards and Mental		GOVERNMENT	42WS
Capacity	41WS	Communities Policy Update	42WS

PETITION

Wednesday 14 March 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>
PRESENTED PETITION	5P
School budgets	5P

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**not later than
Wednesday 21 March 2018**

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 14 March 2018

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 833] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Wales
Prime Minister

Salisbury Incident: Further Update [Col. 855]

Statement—(Prime Minister)

Integrated Communities [Col. 886]

Statement—(Sajid Javid)

Supervised Drug Consumption Facilities [Col. 903]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Alison Thewliss)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

European Affairs (Day 1) [Col. 907]

General Debate

Banking in North Ayrshire [Col. 965]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Foster Care [Col. 327WH]

Electric Dog Collars [Col. 350WH]

Women and Work [Col. 359WH]

Allergy Awareness in Schools [Col. 386WH]

Labour Reforms: Qatar [Col. 394WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 41WS]

Petition [Col. 5P]

Presented Petition

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
