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21 March 2018**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Wednesday 21 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

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Political Parties: Loans and Donations

1. **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): For what reasons the decision was made to publish information about loans and donations given to Northern Ireland political parties dating back to July 2017 rather than 2014. [904409]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): The recent publication by the Electoral Commission of donations and loans data for Northern Ireland parties is a positive step that should be welcomed by the whole House. The decision to backdate transparency was taken on the basis of broad support from the majority of political parties in Northern Ireland.

Layla Moran: It has recently been revealed that a portion of the largest ever political donation given to a party in Northern Ireland was spent on services linked to Cambridge Analytica. In the light of that, should not the Secretary of State backdate transparency regulations to 2014, so that we can finally have full disclosure about where that cash came from?

Karen Bradley: As I say, the decision to backdate to July 2017 was taken due to the broad support of the majority of parties in Northern Ireland. My predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), took time to consult the parties, and July 2017 was the date that they wished to start the transparency from.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I think that my right hon. Friend has already answered the question I wanted to ask: did all the parties agree not to take it back to 2014?

Karen Bradley: As I say, my predecessor consulted all the parties, and this position was supported by the broad majority of them.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State will be able to confirm that even if the regulations did go back to 2014, no information would be published

that has not already been published. Will she also confirm that there is a disparity when there is no mention in this Chamber or elsewhere of the dark money received by Northern Ireland parties from foreign jurisdictions? This is the only place where that is allowed to occur, and it should stop.

Karen Bradley: I firmly believe that transparency is the important thing that we have here. We should all know where money is coming from, and I understand the hon. Gentleman's comments.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am very interested to hear the Secretary of State's explanation of why the Northern Ireland Office deliberately and wilfully ignored the advice and recommendations of the Electoral Commission that the publication of donations to political parties in Northern Ireland should be backdated to 2014, not 2017.

Karen Bradley: There was no wilful ignoring or anything else. My predecessor consulted all the parties in Northern Ireland and there was broad support for July 2017.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): We know about one questionable donation that was channelled from Scotland through the Democratic Unionist party to be used in the Brexit referendum. People are rightly asking what the original source of that money was and whether there are others that we do not know about. If the Secretary of State will not consider revising the recent decision to limit transparency by taking it back to 2014, will she bring forward legislation to allow the individual parties to instruct the Electoral Commission to reveal their donation data?

Karen Bradley: As I have said, we are keen to ensure that there is transparency, but the question the hon. Lady asks is a matter for political parties themselves, not the Government.

Leaving the EU: Discussions with Political Parties

2. **Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with Northern Ireland political parties on the UK leaving the EU. [904410]

8. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with Northern Ireland political parties on the UK leaving the EU. [904416]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Shailesh Vara): The Secretary of State and I have regular conversations with the Northern Ireland political parties on a range of issues. This includes matters relating to the UK's departure from the European Union. As we have said repeatedly, these conversations are no replacement for a fully functioning, locally elected and democratically accountable Executive. That is what the people of Northern Ireland need, and that is what we are focused on.

Michelle Donelan: Does my hon. Friend agree that as we leave the EU, it is essential that current levels of security and co-operation between the UK and Ireland, which are so important in the fight against terrorism, are maintained and enhanced?

Mr Vara: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. All parties have been clear that there will not be any disruption to north-south security co-operation when it comes to policing and tackling the terrorist threat. I applaud the incredible work done by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Garda to keep us safe. That will not change after our EU exit.

Alex Chalk: Will my hon. Friend assure the House that as the UK, including Northern Ireland, leaves the EU, this Government's commitment to the Belfast agreement remains steadfast?

Mr Vara: Yes. I can categorically provide my hon. Friend with the commitment that he seeks. Our negotiating strategy puts our support for the Belfast agreement at the heart of our approach to the Northern Ireland-Ireland dialogue. As the Prime Minister and others have said on numerous occasions, we will continue to abide by the UK's commitments in the Belfast agreement.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Given the meeting on Monday between the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and Michel Barnier, will the Minister confirm that it remains the Government's clear position that the so-called backstop arrangement proposed by the EU Commission is something that no British Prime Minister or Government could ever agree to?

Mr Vara: The Prime Minister has made her views absolutely clear on that. Our country's economic and constitutional integrity will not be harmed.

Nigel Dodds: I thank the Minister for debunking the notion that, as a result of the transition arrangements, somehow the Government have reneged on that pledge and for confirming that the Government remain firmly committed to the constitutional, political and economic integrity of the UK. Will he ensure that industries such as the Northern Ireland fishing industry are protected after we leave the EU and that we will take back control of our territorial waters, including our rights for our fishermen?

Mr Vara: The right hon. Gentleman makes some very good points. I can confirm that the agreement reached in December in the joint report remains, and that Britain will do all that it can to ensure that all our industries, particularly fisheries, are maintained and that our fishermen and the industry are well looked after.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I am sure that one issue the Minister and the Secretary of State will have discussed with the political parties in Northern Ireland is the problems they see with a hard border returning in Ireland. What are those problems and what does the Minister suggest that we do to avoid them?

Mr Vara: The Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and many others have made it absolutely clear that there will be no hard border.

Owen Smith: That is not much of an answer. The Government should acknowledge that the parties all think that there would be problems with a hard border, as do the Chief Constable, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the Irish Government and many Conservative

Members. Should he not therefore acknowledge the problems and tell the House that the only way to avoid a hard border is for us to stay within the customs union and the single market?

Mr Vara: The people of Britain—England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales—collectively agreed to leave the single market and customs union, and that will be the case. As for the border, the December joint report made it absolutely clear that there will be no physical infrastructure and no hard border. There will be a frictionless border, and that is what is being negotiated and discussed.

Leaving the EU: Cross-border Trade

3. **Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP):** What recent discussions she has had with the Irish Government on cross-border trade after the UK leaves the EU. [904411]

5. **Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP):** What recent discussions she has had with the Irish Government on cross-border trade after the UK leaves the EU. [904413]

6. **Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP):** What recent discussions she has had with the Irish Government on cross-border trade after the UK leaves the EU. [904414]

7. **Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP):** What recent discussions she has had with the Irish Government on cross-border trade after the UK leaves the EU. [904415]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): I have regular conversations with the Irish Government. We both recognise the importance of the trade that takes place across the island of Ireland, which is worth £4 billion to the Northern Ireland economy. Equally, Great Britain markets are fundamental to Northern Ireland, with sales worth some £14.6 billion. As the Prime Minister reinforced in her Mansion House speech, we are committed to protecting both these vital markets.

Carol Monaghan: The Tánaiste told the Dáil yesterday that there would be no formal withdrawal agreement between the EU and the UK if the Irish border issue was not resolved. The Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), has already said this morning that there will be no hard border, but will the Secretary of State explain how that will come about?

Karen Bradley: I do not think that the hon. Lady has said anything that is news to anybody. We are committed to the agreement we made in the joint report and to the Belfast agreement and all that it stands for. We will ensure that there is no new physical infrastructure at the border and that there is frictionless trade.

Gavin Newlands: Simon Coveney also told the Dáil yesterday that the UK Government had provided a cast-iron guarantee that there would be no physical infrastructure, checks or controls at the border post Brexit. Will the Secretary of State confirm this—yes or no?

Karen Bradley: I think that I just answered that question. There will be frictionless trade and movement at the border, and no new physical infrastructure.

Peter Grant: Last week, the Prime Minister spoke quite favourably about the “Smart Border 2.0” report from Dr Lars Karlsson. Yesterday, in evidence to the Brexit Committee, Dr Karlsson confirmed that the report was not tailored to the needs of Ireland and that it was incompatible with the December agreement that there would be no hard border in Ireland. Can the Government confirm that Dr Karlsson’s report will not form the basis of any future negotiations or agreement with the EU?

Karen Bradley: I confess that I am not familiar with that particular report. I will look into it.

Tommy Sheppard: Yesterday, the Irish Foreign Minister suggested that the EU-UK transition arrangements could be extended beyond 2020 if better arrangements were not in place for the Irish border. Do the problems with dealing with the border mean that the UK could stay in the single market, the customs union and the common fisheries policy for longer, but without having any say?

Karen Bradley: I presume that the hon. Gentleman wrote his question before the announcement in Brussels by Michel Barnier and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. The transitional arrangements will end in December 2020. The United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, and leaving the European Union means leaving the single market and the customs union—that is what we will do.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend has every sympathy with the Irish Government. They did not want Brexit, and there are lots of risks for Ireland and no upside. Will my right hon. Friend nevertheless impress on her interlocutors in Dublin that the option presented in the draft withdrawal agreement is wholly unacceptable and that they should work with us to ensure that option 1 in the December joint report goes ahead?

Karen Bradley: Both the UK Government and the Irish Government have stated that they would like to address the issue of the Irish border through the overall UK-EU relationship, as set out in option 1 in the joint report.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): A competitive free trade deal between the United Kingdom and the European Union is clearly in the interests of both Northern Ireland and the Republic. Will my right hon. Friend therefore take the opportunity to suggest to the Taoiseach and others that it is in their interests to put pressure on the European Union to negotiate just that deal?

Karen Bradley: I would sum it up by saying that this is either a win-win or a lose-lose; there is no win-lose option whereby one side loses and the other wins. We will all benefit if we secure free trade arrangements and deal with the Irish border through the overall UK-EU relationship.

David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my confidence that we will find a satisfactory solution to such trade issues in the negotiations before we leave the EU?

Karen Bradley: I do share my right hon. Friend’s optimism. I believe that we can negotiate a deal that works for all sides.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State think that it would be a good idea to ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and Mr Barnier to come to the border—not for a press conference, but for a full day—to see the hundreds upon hundreds of crossing points and to debunk the nonsense and myth of a hard border, which would be irrelevant and impossible to enforce?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. There are more crossing points in the 310 miles of land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic than there are on the whole eastern land border between the European Union and non-member states. However, I think that it will reassure the hon. Gentleman to know that both Mr Barnier, who was working in the European Commission at the time of the Belfast agreement, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union are very familiar with that border.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Now that spring has come and there is a lightness and warmth in the air, may the equinoctial optimism extend to all politicians in Northern Ireland!

I know that the Secretary of State is well aware of the important role played by the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, particularly during the previous period of direct rule, when there were 18 meetings between 1999 and 2007. With no devolution, and with the horrors of Brexit looming ever larger, what plans does she have to reconvene the BIIGC, and when and where will it be reconvened?

Karen Bradley: It seems ironic that on the day when there are exactly 12 hours of daylight, we have scheduled 12 hours of programmed time in which to debate Northern Ireland legislation.

Stephen Pound: Not enough.

Karen Bradley: It may well not be enough; it will depend on how the shadow Secretary of State feels.

I regularly discuss with both the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach issues relating to our commitments in the Belfast agreement, and I continue to reflect on those matters.

Mr Speaker: I am bound to say that I am a little disappointed that there was a less than fully attentive audience for the legendary thespian performance of the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), to which many of us have become accustomed over the last two decades, but there are always other occasions on which people can listen more closely—and should.

Stephen Pound: Shall I do it again?

Mr Speaker: Another time. Let us keep it for the long summer evenings that lie ahead. I call Tom Pursglove.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): How do you follow that, Mr Speaker?

Leaving the EU: The Economy

4. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to identify opportunities to strengthen Northern Ireland's economy as the UK leaves the EU. [904412]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Shailesh Vara): I am not even going to try to follow that.

The Government are committed to building a stronger economy fit for the future right across the United Kingdom. That is clear from our industrial strategy and the Chancellor's spring statement, where we continue to identify further opportunities for investment in Northern Ireland. Ultimately, however, a key requirement for stronger growth is political stability. That is why it is essential that a restored Executive are in place to take forward strategic decisions to deliver for Northern Ireland's economy.

Tom Pursglove: Tayto has operations not only in Corby, but in Northern Ireland, and it is very good news that in recent times the operation has expanded considerably. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that such UK-wide manufacturing industries continue to grow and prosper?

Mr Vara: Tayto Group is the third largest snack manufacturer in the UK. It employs some 1,500 people right across the country—from Tandragee to Corby, and from Scunthorpe to Devon—and is one of the many success stories for growth. Through our industrial strategy, we are creating conditions in which successful businesses such as Tayto Group can thrive, helping them to invest in the future of our nation. We are shaping our business environment to take on the challenges and opportunities of new technologies and new ways of doing business, especially as we leave the EU, and to develop new trade relationships and expand our global trade networks.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Institute of Export and International Trade says that if Northern Ireland is not in the single market or customs union, it will face 350 million new product codes. How many tens of thousands of administrators would Northern Ireland need to continue its current trade, let alone expand it?

Mr Vara: I can rebut such pessimistic claims with actual fact. The employment figures that we will publish this morning say that there are 66,000 more jobs now than in 2010, with 15,000 of them created in the last year. Since 2010, we have 12,300 new businesses.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): When the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, this House will no longer be prohibited from reducing the rate of corporation tax for Northern Ireland. If the institutions are not up and running by that time, would the Minister consider taking that step?

Mr Vara: We very much hope that the devolved Assembly will be up and running, because it is for the Assembly to take the decision of reducing corporation tax. We are very committed to it doing that on the basis that it can show sustainable finances.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Despite the ongoing political situation, Northern Ireland has had a very positive business environment this year, particularly in relation to foreign direct investment. Will the Minister consider establishing a formal and regular business forum to include Invest NI and organisations and local businesses in Northern Ireland, to ensure that they can maximise opportunities that arise from the UK leaving the EU?

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady makes a good point. I have just been assured by my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary that he would be happy to participate in such a venture.

Police Recruitment and Overtime

9. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): If she will hold discussions with the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland on recruiting more officers and reducing its overtime budget. [904417]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Shailesh Vara): Policing is a devolved matter and should be overseen by a restored Executive at Stormont. The Chief Constable continues to engage extensively with the Northern Ireland Department of Justice on operational and financial issues. Both the Secretary of State and I have met the Chief Constable to discuss various issues. The PSNI does a superb job and will always have the fullest possible support of this Government. We have committed an extra £32 million a year to support its response to Northern Ireland-related terrorism.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. Bearing in mind the fact that the potential overtime bill for the PSNI is £48 million, will he further outline his perception regarding recruitment, as it would be better to have a recruitment policy involving more feet on the ground, because that would adjust the overtime bill and ensure that police officers would not be burnt out because they have to work overtime? Will Ministers agree to do that?

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, but he will be aware that PSNI operational matters such as staffing levels are a matter for the Chief Constable. I hope that he will take on board what the hon. Gentleman says.

Leaving the EU: Healthcare

10. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that healthcare provision in Northern Ireland is maintained after the UK leaves the EU. [904418]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): There is ongoing positive engagement between UK Government officials and the Northern Ireland

civil service to ensure that the current provision is maintained as part of the common travel area, as agreed in the joint report in the December Council.

Kerry McCarthy: At the moment, children from Northern Ireland can access emergency heart surgery in Dublin, cancer patients from the Republic can have treatment in Derry and ambulances cross the border to attend emergencies. Can the Secretary of State give an absolute guarantee that that will continue post Brexit?

Karen Bradley: I visited the hospital in Derry and saw for myself the excellent treatment that patients from the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland receive there. About a third of the patients at that hospital come from the Republic. It is essential that we maintain that situation by maintaining the common travel area, as agreed in the joint report in December. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a considerable hubbub in the Chamber, which is arguably discourteous to the people of Northern Ireland and certainly unfair on Members from Northern Irish constituencies. Let us have a respectful hearing for Mr David Simpson.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Secretary of State will be aware of the European health card system. Does she envisage that system continuing when we leave the European Union, or will there be some other arrangement?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that that was one of the early matters to be settled as part of the negotiations with the European Union. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union was able to ensure that that will continue.

Live Animal Exports

11. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What steps she is taking to prevent the unnecessary suffering of live animals exported from Northern Ireland. [904419]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Shailesh Vara): The Government are committed to improving the welfare of all animals. We expect animals across the UK to be transported in conditions that comply fully with welfare requirements, and would prefer animals across the UK to be slaughtered close to the point of production. Animal welfare is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland; it would be for a future Northern Ireland Executive to determine their own policy.

Henry Smith: May I seek assurances that, as we leave the European Union, in Northern Ireland as in the rest of the United Kingdom we will use the opportunity to enhance animal welfare standards?

Mr Vara: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Government share the public's high regard for animal welfare, and we are proud to have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. He will appreciate, however, that animal welfare is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, and it would be for a future Northern Ireland Executive to determine their own policy. We have been clear that when we leave the EU, we will not only maintain the existing rules on animal welfare but, where possible, look to strengthen those requirements.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): As the Minister has said, Northern Ireland has very high animal welfare standards, and surely we can do better than what the EU offers in terms of animal welfare standards.

Mr Vara: It is our intention not only to stay at the same level but to continue to improve our levels of animal welfare.

Devolved Government

12. **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What progress has been made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [904420]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): I set out—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] It is nice to be welcomed so loudly—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. It is impossible to hear the Secretary of State. She did not realise just how popular she was, but now she knows.

Karen Bradley: I set out the Government's approach to restoring devolved government in my statement to the House on 12 March. As I said then, the UK Government remain determined to see devolved government re-established. We are continuing to work with all the Northern Ireland parties—and with the Irish Government, as appropriate—towards restoring the Executive and a fully functioning Assembly.

David Hanson: What progress has the Secretary of State made on involving Assembly Members in scrutiny? Has she had discussions with the political parties, and does she expect them to be involved in the scrutiny of the budget proposals announced yesterday?

Karen Bradley: Specifically on the budget, I made sure that all the main political parties represented in Stormont had sight of it before I announced it, because I sincerely hope that they will be the parties that will actually deliver that budget. The right hon. Gentleman will also know from my statement of 12 March that I have had a number of representations and that I continue to receive suggestions about how we might get some form of functioning Assembly working in Stormont, and I am considering all those approaches.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State realise that so long as Sinn Féin refuses to enter the Stormont Assembly without laying down pre-conditions and continues to create a toxic political atmosphere in Northern Ireland, there is little chance of restoring devolved government, and that she must consider ways of ensuring that Northern Ireland is governed properly in the meantime?

Karen Bradley: As I have said, several suggestions and representations have been made to me about what the next steps might be, and I am considering all of them. I am looking at what we can do to ensure that we get something that gets us back on the road towards having a fully restored devolved Government.

Youth Commonwealth Games

13. **Kate Hoey** (Vauxhall) (Lab): What support the Government is providing for the hosting of the 2021 Youth Commonwealth games in Belfast. [904421]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): Under the terms of the devolution settlement, responsibility for sporting events such as the Commonwealth youth games is a matter for the devolved Administration. The Government are continuing to work towards the restoration of a devolved Government in Northern Ireland for precisely that reason. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is still too much noise in the Chamber. Let us hear the voice of Vauxhall.

Kate Hoey: I am afraid that that is really not good enough from the Secretary of State. Northern Ireland has won the right to host this hugely important sporting event, and the Secretary of State must make these decisions. We cannot wait until we get another Executive, which could be a very long time coming. The decision must be made, and the Secretary of State must actually show that she is in charge.

Karen Bradley: I feel as if I were answering questions in my previous role at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, because this issue crossed my desk there. My officials have met the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council to discuss whether the option of holding the 2021 games in Northern Ireland could be sustained until such times as the devolved institutions are restored and in a position to consider the decisions required.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): Northern Ireland is heavily dependent on tourism, including event-driven tourism. Our work is linked with that of Tourism Ireland, but unfortunately, we do not believe that we are getting a fair crack of the whip in terms of delivery for our contribution to that body.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman had in mind a particular focus on the games and just accidentally neglected to say so.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is quite right that the 2021 games would bring tourists to Northern Ireland, and I have had discussions with both the Tourism Minister and others about tourism in Northern Ireland. He will welcome the call for evidence announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor last week with regard to specific tourism issues in Northern Ireland.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904494] **Mr George Howarth** (Knowsley) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 21 March.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Tomorrow marks the one-year anniversary of the Westminster terrorist attack. It was a sick and depraved attack on the

streets of our capital, but what I remember most is the exceptional bravery of our police and security services, who risked their lives to keep us safe. I know that Members will be attending events tomorrow and over the weekend to mark this tragic anniversary.

I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in expressing our sincere condolences to the family and friends of the Red Arrows engineer who tragically died in the aircraft incident at RAF Valley yesterday.

Members across the House will also wish to join me in congratulating Andria Zafirakou, who recently won the global teacher prize. It is a fitting tribute to everything that she has done, and I look forward to meeting her shortly to congratulate her in person.

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

Mr Howarth: I am sure that the whole House will want to be associated with the condolences and congratulations that the Prime Minister has just expressed.

Since 2010, Merseyside police has lost 1,084 police officers. In 2017, crime in Knowsley went up by 18.5%, and there were 21 firearm discharges, one of which resulted in a fatality. Across the force area, there were 94 firearm discharges, with four fatalities. Local MPs have met Home Office Ministers, but no extra resources have been provided. Will the Prime Minister arrange for the Home Secretary to meet local MPs to discuss what additional support can be given to deal with that serious problem?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that with the Knowsley safety partnership with Merseyside police, crime statistics in his constituency have fallen by 9% since the year ending June 2010. He mentioned some incidents that are of real concern, and I am sure that the police are giving their full attention to them. We are ensuring that overall—[*Interruption.*] He points at the Home Secretary, but my right hon. Friend is ensuring that overall, in the next year, not only will we protect police budgets but we will see, with precept, £450 million extra available to police forces across the country.

Q3. [904496] **Gareth Johnson** (Dartford) (Con): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's earlier comments? Britain's ability to trade with the world has been curtailed by the EU for over 40 years, but we have now won the ability to sign our own trade agreements around the world. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is Brexit's greatest opportunity and ensures that we can embrace the globe as a truly proud international country once again?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. He is absolutely right—I agree with him that this is an important opportunity for the United Kingdom post Brexit, because for the first time in 40 years we will be able to step out into the world and forge our own way by negotiating our own trade agreements and signing trade deals with old friends and new allies alike. We will, of course, be able to do that. As he knows, from next March we will no longer be a member state of the European Union, and in due course we will be able to bring into force new trade arrangements around the rest of the world—a truly global Britain.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I, too, join the Prime Minister in commemorating the attacks that took place in Westminster a year ago, and I, too, will be at some of the events tomorrow. We should all remember this as an attack on democracy within our society.

I also join the Prime Minister in sending condolences to the friends and family of the Red Arrows engineer who sadly died yesterday. We wish the pilot well in his recovery.

I had the pleasure of meeting Andria Zafirakou, who won the global teacher award, just before she went off to receive it, and we should all congratulate her and Alperton School in Brent on the great work that she does there.

Today is the Kurdish new year, Newroz, so can we wish all Kurdish people around the world a happy new year and, particularly for those who are suffering so much in the conflict in Syria, a hope of peace in the year to come?

Does the Prime Minister believe that the collapse of Northamptonshire Council is the result of Conservative incompetence at a local level, or is it Conservative incompetence at a national level?

The Prime Minister: May I first join the right hon. Gentleman in wishing all those who are celebrating a very happy Newroz?

If we are looking at what is happening in relation to local councils, obviously there has been a report on Northamptonshire County Council, but let us look at what we see across the board in councils. *[Interruption.]* Yes, yes—if we look at what is happening in councils up and down the country there is one message for everybody: Conservative councils cost you less.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was actually quite specific to Northamptonshire. The Tory leader of the council said:

“We have been warning Government from about 2013-14...we couldn't cope with the level of cuts that we were facing”.

Three years ago, that council bragged that it was pioneering an “easy council” model. It then proceeded to outsource 96% of council staff, and transferred them to new service providers, which were run like private companies paying dividends. Now that council has gone bust. Does the Prime Minister really believe that the slash and burn model for local government is really a good one?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman, first, that it would be helpful if he accurately reflected the independent statutory inspection, which concluded last week. The report was clear that Northamptonshire's failure is not a case of underfunding. Indeed, Northamptonshire's core spending power is set to rise by £14.5 million, so the attack he is making—that this is all about the amount of money the Government are providing—is not correct. What we are ensuring is that councils are able to provide good services up and down the country, and that is what we see with Conservative councils up and down the country—they are costing people less than Labour.

Jeremy Corbyn: But the problem is that Northamptonshire has gone bust, and this is caused by the Conservative Government and a Conservative council. It is a model

still being used by Barnet Borough Council, which, until very recently, was run by the Conservatives—they lost control of it this week. Capita holds contracts there with an estimated value of £500 million. What has Barnet done? It has cut council staff every year and increased spending on consultants every year. Government cuts mean that councils across England are facing a £5.8 billion funding gap by 2020. So with hindsight, does the Prime Minister really believe it was right to prioritise tax cuts for the super-rich and big business? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The House is becoming rather overexcited. I said a moment ago that the Prime Minister's answer must be heard. The question from the Leader of the Opposition must also be heard, and it will be, however long it takes. *[Interruption.]* Mr Snell, you are behaving in a most undignified manner—compose yourself, man.

Jeremy Corbyn: There seemed to be a lot of concern among Conservative Members about my suggestion that the Government had prioritised tax cuts for the super-rich and big business, and put them as more important than funding for social care, libraries, repairing potholes, bin collection or street cleaning.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about bin collection. Well, people living in Birmingham under a Labour-run council saw thousands of tonnes of waste on the streets because the council was failing to collect the bins. He talks about tax, and we all know that the top 1% of taxpayers are paying a higher burden of tax than they ever paid under Labour. And we all know what Labour would mean for council tax payers, because just this week the shadow Communities Secretary—*[Interruption.]* “Oh”, he says. Could that be because he does not want people to know what he is supporting? He has supported a plan to stop local taxpayers having the right to stop tax hikes; he is supporting a plan to introduce a land value tax—a tax on your home and your garden—and he wants to introduce a new hotel tax. We all know what would happen under Labour: more taxes, and ordinary working people would pay the price.

Jeremy Corbyn: The shadow Secretary of State supports councils, thinks they should be properly funded and does not think they should be a vehicle for privatisation.

The leader of Surrey County Council, who happens to be a Conservative, has said:

“We are facing the most difficult financial crisis in our history.”

He did not mince his words, because he went on to say:

“The Government cannot...stand idly by while Rome burns.”

Council funding has been cut by half since 2010. Households in England now face council tax rises of £1 billion. The Tory leader of the Local Government Association says that

“councils will have to continue to cut back services or stop some altogether”

due to Government cuts. So as people open their council tax bills, is it not clear what the Conservative message is—pay more to get less?

The Prime Minister: The average council tax for a band D property is £100 less under Conservative councils than it is under Labour councils. The right hon. Gentleman says that his shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is supporting councils, but I wonder whether he supports these councils: Haringey, where the Labour leader was forced out; Brighton, where the Labour leader was forced out; and Cornwall, where the Labour group leader was forced out. What had these people done? They had supported building more homes, providing good local services and tackling anti-Semitism in the Labour party. The message is clear: if you believe in good local services, want to see more homes built and want to tackle anti-Semitism, there is no place for you in the Labour party.

Jeremy Corbyn: Labour councils build houses; Conservative councils privatise—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a very raucous atmosphere. I have said it before and I will say it again: Back-Bench Members should seek to imitate the zen-like calm of the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who is an example to us all.

Jeremy Corbyn: We all admire zen, Mr Speaker.

Pay more for less is the Conservative message. In Leicestershire, the county council is pushing through £50 million-worth of cuts and council tax increases of 6%. Its deputy leader blamed chronically low Government funding. That is the Tory message: pay more to get less. It is not just households: the average small shop will see its rates bill increase by £3,600. Empty shops suck all the life out of our high streets and local communities, so why is the Prime Minister presiding over a Government who are tearing the heart out of our local high streets?

The Prime Minister: First of all, we have provided extra support for small businesses in relation to business rates. Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman talks about Labour councils building homes, but we have seen more council homes being built under this Government than under 13 years of a Labour Government. He talks about what councillors are saying at a local level; I am pleased to say that yesterday two Labour councillors from Ashfield District Council joined the Conservatives, and what did one of them say? He said:

“Both locally and nationally”

the Labour party

“has been taken over by the hard-left who are more interested in fighting internal ideological battles than standing up for the priorities of working men and women.”

Conservatives will always welcome people who care about their local area and we will always stand up for people in their local area.

Jeremy Corbyn: Half a million businesses will see their rates rise this year, some by 500%. Even Mary Portas, who led the Government’s “Save the High Street” campaign, said that it was simply a

“PR campaign which looked like ‘hey, we’re doing something’ and I hoped it might kick-start something—but it didn’t.”

The Conservative Government have slashed public services. They cut funding and expect councils to pick up the pieces. The result is that children’s centres are closing, schools are struggling, there are fewer police on

the streets, older people are being left without care or dignity, and refuges are turning women away. The Tories’ own head of local government says it is unsustainable. Doesn’t it tell us everything we need to know about the Government that they demand that households and businesses pay more to get less?

The Prime Minister: This Government are spending more on our schools and on our NHS than ever before. We are able to do that because of the balanced approach we take to our economy and because of the strong economy we see under the Conservatives. I notice that in his six questions the right hon. Gentleman did not mention today’s unemployment figures. Employment is at a joint record high. Unemployment has not been lower since 1975. Economic inactivity is at a record low. That is a strong jobs market. Who benefits from a strong jobs market? Labour staffers, Labour council leaders and moderate Labour Members of Parliament.

Q4. [904497] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I can only assume that the Leader of the Opposition has not read the report about Northamptonshire County Council; I commend it to him. But I want to focus on a different issue today. Worldwide, every minute, millions of throwaway paper coffee cups go to landfill. To solve that, we need industry, consumers and the Government to work together. In that spirit, Amaray, a company in my constituency, has developed a fully recyclable alternative cup; it can be easily recycled, unlike the current option. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming that innovation? Perhaps if she is around afterwards, I might be able to give one to her.

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to say to my hon. Friend that, if he would like to come along and see me afterwards, I am very happy to do that. He has raised an important point. As he knows, we are committed to wanting to leave our environment in a better state than we found it. I congratulate Amaray and welcome the innovation that it has shown. This is an important example of working with industry to ensure that we are dealing with this issue of plastic waste. We were clear in our 25-year environment plan that that is what we want to do, and Amaray is a very good example of exactly that.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister about the terrorist atrocity in Westminster a year ago? Our thoughts are obviously with those who gave their lives and, of course, with the emergency services. I also want to associate myself with the remarks about the loss of the engineer.

Does the Prime Minister agree that subverting the democratic political process of any country is totally unacceptable?

The Prime Minister: We certainly believe in ensuring that democratic processes are able to continue and that people see free and fair elections. I think that is what everybody in this House would recognise and would accept.

Ian Blackford: I thank the Prime Minister for that answer. May I point out to her that the parent company of Cambridge Analytica is Strategic Communications

Laboratories? It has been run by a chairman of the Oxford Conservative Association. Its founding chairman was a former Conservative MP. A director appears to have donated more than £700,000 to the Tory party. A former Conservative party treasurer is a shareholder. We know about the links to the Conservative party: they go on and on. Will the Prime Minister confirm to the House her Government's connections to the company?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has been talking about two companies: the parent company, SCL, and Cambridge Analytica. As far as I am aware, the Government have no current contracts with Cambridge Analytica, or with the SCL group. The allegations are clearly very concerning, and it is absolutely right that they should be properly investigated. It is right that the Information Commissioner is doing exactly that because people need to have confidence in how their personal data is being used. I would expect Facebook, Cambridge Analytica and all organisations involved to comply fully with the investigation that is taking place. I am pleased to say that the Bill that we are bringing forward on data protection will strengthen legislation around data protection and give the Information Commissioner's Office tougher powers to ensure that organisations comply. I hope that it will be supported by everybody across this House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: We now have a lot of Back Benchers' questions to get through.

Q7. [904500] **Gordon Henderson** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): Some London boroughs are renting houses in Kent, including in Sittingbourne and Sheppey, for use as temporary accommodation for homeless families. My local authorities are then expected to provide those families with the support they need. That is putting a strain on Kent's schools, hospitals and social services, which receive no extra funding to provide that support. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the London Mayor and the London boroughs should be providing more homes in the capital, so that London families can be looked after by them, instead of placing the burden of care on hard-pressed council tax payers in Kent?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to speak up on behalf of his constituents on this issue. London authorities must secure temporary accommodation within their own borough, as far as is reasonably practical. We have also changed the law so that councils must take into account the impact that a change in location would have on a household. However, he is absolutely right: we do want the London Mayor and London boroughs to be able to build more homes. Money has been provided to the Mayor of London to build affordable homes. It is a pity that he has not been building as many as we would like.

Q2. [904495] **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): School cuts in Portsmouth under this Government will reach £3.3 million by 2019, meaning that classrooms are being starved of the resources that they need, including textbooks and basic stationery. At the same time, approximately 40,000 children in the south-east are relying on food banks. If the Prime Minister were a

teacher who had been under a pay cut for eight years, what would she buy a struggling child in one of my city's classrooms—a textbook or a square meal?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of school funding. As I said in response to the Leader of the Opposition, the amount of money that we are spending on schools is greater than it has ever been before. What matters is the quality of education provided in schools, which is why I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman did not welcome the fact that over 20,000 children in his area are now at a good or outstanding school; that is 9,000 more than in 2010.

Q8. [904502] **Kwasi Kwarteng** (Spelthorne) (Con): I am sure that we all recognise and welcome the employment figures announced today, but given the latest report that there are still unacceptably high levels of youth unemployment among ethnic communities in Britain, will my right hon. Friend explain to the House what the new £90 million fund will do to help young people into work?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We know these figures because of the race disparity audit that I commissioned when I became Prime Minister. The audit shows that there has been progress, but we need to do more because 16 to 24-year-olds in other ethnic groups are twice as likely as their white peers to be unemployed. The £90 million that I announced will help to tackle those inequalities in youth employment. The initiative will be run by the Big Lottery Fund, and it will identify the barriers to employment for those young people and help them to overcome those barriers. That is incredibly important. I was very pleased to visit Street League in Birmingham, which is already doing excellent work in this area.

Q5. [904498] **Mrs Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The war in Syria has now entered its eighth year. In recent weeks, over 1,000 people have been killed in eastern Ghouta. In Afrin, hundreds of Kurds lie dead and 200,000 civilians are desperately fleeing for their lives; even the hospital has been attacked. What will the Government do to help to bring urgent humanitarian relief for those in such despair?

The Prime Minister: We take the situation in eastern Ghouta very seriously indeed, which is why we have raised the issue at the United Nations Security Council. The Foreign Secretary has also raised this matter with others. We have been very clear about what needed to happen to ensure that people could be protected, that humanitarian aid could get in and that safe passage could be given to those for whom it was necessary due to their condition. We will continue to press this case.

Q9. [904503] **Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): The Select Committee on Education recently interviewed a panel of university vice-chancellors who failed to recognise that their salaries are outrageous, being twice that of the Prime Minister and mainly funded by the taxpayer and student debt. Given that these outrageous salaries are paid in even the poorest performing universities, will the Prime Minister confirm that this situation will be looked at in the post-18 education review?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised a point that others are concerned about as well. Of course, universities are autonomous from the Government, so it is up to them how they set the pay of their vice-chancellors and what level they set it at, but they should recognise that students and taxpayers are all contributing to our higher education system and expect value for money. The Office for Students, which has now been set up, will be acting to ensure greater transparency in relation to senior staff pay and requiring a justification for the total remuneration package that is awarded to the head of the provider and the provider's most senior staff, so we will now start to see a light being shone very clearly on the issue that my hon. Friend raises.

Q6. [904499] Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Last week, the Agriculture and Fisheries Secretary and Ruth Davidson said:

"The Prime Minister has been clear: Britain will leave the CFP as of March 2019."

Now, the UK is staying in the common fisheries policy but with no say on quotas—the worst deal imaginable. What changed between last week and this week?

The Prime Minister: We will be working with the fishing industry, both fishermen and fish processors, to ensure that we do see a bright future for the fishing industry. I want to see three things: we will take back control of our waters, we will ensure that we do not see British fishermen unfairly denied access to other waters, and we want to rebuild our fishing industry. But it is the Conservative party that is committed to coming out of the common fisheries policy; the hon. Gentleman's party wants to stay in the common fisheries policy.

Q13. [904507] Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Cherwell is really proud to be building three houses a day but construction traffic is playing havoc with our road services. Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss what more national Government can do to help with inevitable growing pains?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I am very happy to congratulate Cherwell on the homes that it is building, but I recognise that this brings with it other challenges. At Budget, we more than doubled the housing infrastructure fund with another £2.7 billion, and earlier today my right hon. Friend the Housing Secretary, I am pleased to say, announced a further 44 areas shortlisted for funding for major infrastructure projects worth £4.1 billion, with the potential to deliver 400,000 more homes. I recognise the important role that infrastructure plays, and that is why the Government are delivering it.

Q10. [904504] Sir David Crausby (Bolton North East) (Lab): The Prime Minister was right to prevent members of the royal family and Government Ministers from attending the football World cup in Russia, but what is being done to safeguard everyday football fans in what was, in my view, already a dangerous place to watch football, even before the incident in Salisbury? What advice will be given to travelling English supporters, many of whom have already bought their tickets, and is she confident that adequate co-operation between our police and the Russian police will protect English fans?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the important issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised, because we want British football fans to be able to be safe when they are enjoying watching the England team. We are currently working very closely with the police in looking at what arrangements will be in place to support the England football fans who travel to Russia. The Foreign Office will be carefully monitoring the situation and ensuring that advice is available to football fans, so that they are aware of the circumstances there will be in Russia and what support will be available.

Q14. [904508] Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that I have mentioned Jacci Woodcock, a terminally ill constituent of mine who set up the Dying to Work campaign. Santander, her mortgage broker, has been incredibly helpful in freezing her payments and will take them from her estate when she dies, but now it has gone even further—it is not increasing the interest payments either. Does my right hon. Friend agree that other banks should follow the caring and compassionate example set by Santander and that we should encourage them to look after terminally ill people in the same way?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an issue that I know she cares about very deeply. I am certainly happy to join her in congratulating Santander on the support that it has provided to Jacci Woodcock. Obviously, my hon. Friend has raised a wider issue. It is important for employers to be aware of and to fulfil their legal obligations to their employees, including terminally ill employees, and I am sure that others will look at the excellent example that Santander has set.

Q11. [904505] Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): *The Sunday Times* said this week that Bedford's relatively affordable housing and easy access to London have made it one of the best places to live in the UK, but Bedford constituents are concerned about the school funding cuts, court services cuts, the impending closure of our only walk-in centre, the big increase in homelessness and the loss of fast peak-time rail services to London. My question to the Prime Minister is, why are her Government ruining the prospects of our great town?

The Prime Minister: The prospects of the hon. Gentleman's great town are being improved. They are being improved by the fact that we see thousands more children in good or outstanding schools in Bedford local authority than when we came to power. They are being improved by the fact that extra funding is going into the health service in Bedford. They are also being improved by the fact that this Government are ensuring we have a strong economy, providing jobs for people in his constituency.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Financial services are critical to thousands of my constituents and to the country as a whole. Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to update the House on the progress made on ensuring that our future trade deal with the European Union includes an agreement on financial services?

The Prime Minister: I am well aware of the importance of financial services for the United Kingdom, in my hon. Friend's constituency and elsewhere, and also the important role that the City of London plays in the

financial sector for the whole European Union. We are in discussion with the European Union about this matter, and there is a recognition of the significant role that the City of London plays and the importance of ensuring that we maintain access to finance across the European Union.

Q12. [904506] Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Mental health issues affect one in 10 children, who on average have to see their GP three times before a referral, with many waiting up to 18 months for treatment. I acknowledge the Green Paper on this issue, but at a time when national funding in this area is being constantly cut, including a 5% reduction in funding to Lewisham child and adolescent mental health services, is this not another example of the Government saying one thing but doing another with our NHS?

The Prime Minister: The Government are putting more funding into mental health provision. We have already committed to making available an additional £1.4 billion to improve children and young people's mental health services, and we have committed that, by 2020-21, 70,000 more children and young people each year will have access to high-quality NHS mental health care. The hon. Lady rightly raises mental health as an important issue for us to deal with, and particularly the mental health of children and young people, but across the board we need to give more attention to mental health. We are putting money into it, and we are clear that we want to see parity of esteem between mental health and physical health in the national health service. That is something the Labour party in 13 years of government failed to do.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): The EU agreement published this week has sadly left my fishermen in Amble and the north-east very anxious. While it is great news that we will regain control of our fishing grounds at the end of the implementation period, there is real concern that our EU colleagues might try to take advantage of our losing our voice in the CFP by altering discard rules or quota rules during the implementation period. Will the Prime Minister consider asking the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to prepare a financial mitigation plan to protect our fleet until 2021 should we need to do so?

The Prime Minister: The implementation period is there so that people have the certainty of being able to operate on the same basis until we reach the new partnership that we are negotiating. As I said earlier, in that new partnership, we want to take back control of our waters but ensure that British fishermen are not unfairly denied access to other waters and that we can rebuild our fishing industry. That is important. My hon. Friend mentioned quotas. It has been agreed that the stability key will not be changed, so the quotas that British fishermen will be operating under will not be changed. I know that DEFRA is looking actively at how we can ensure that we not only maintain our fishing industry, but enhance and rebuild it after we leave.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): This week, every party in Westminster took part in an international summit to challenge violence against women

in politics, and online abuse dominated the discussions. Last year, the Prime Minister's Government considered a statutory code of practice for social media corporations, holding them to account for the abusive content they publish. Will she confirm whether she remains content with a toothless voluntary code, or will she now give us a digital guard dog that both barks and bites?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an important point. On all these issues, we have taken the view that we should first sit down with those in the industry and work with them to see what they are willing to do on a voluntary basis, but they know that if that does not actually work, we will look at legislation. She raises an important point about the abuse that takes place. She refers particularly to the abuse that takes place within political campaigning, and I am afraid we have now reached a very sorry state of affairs in this country. We want to see free and fair elections and people having the confidence to be able to go out and put their views forward without fearing that they are going to be abused for it.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The clinically led Future Fit programme for Shropshire seeks to improve and modernise hospital services across the county of Shropshire. We have been waiting for a decision on this issue for many years. Will the Prime Minister use her good offices to ensure that this vital scheme is supported in the coming weeks, so that we can secure this vital investment for Shropshire NHS?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to speak up for the NHS in Shropshire in the way he has done. He will be pleased to see that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care heard his comments, and I think will be contacting him about this issue.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Bercow review made a big difference in improving services for children with communication needs—communication is the key life skill for children to learn and thrive—yet, a decade on, the latest report shows that much more needs to be done. Will the Prime Minister commit to a cross-Government strategy that puts this issue at the heart of policy and gives all our children the best possible start in life?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very important issue. We welcome the report, and the Department for Education is going to be considering it carefully. We do not want to see any child held back from achieving their potential, and that includes ensuring that children with speech, language and communication needs are given the support they need. There has been particular training for teachers to support children who require additional help to communicate, and we will be introducing the education, health and care plans to make sure that children with additional needs receive the right support to succeed in school in the future, but we will look very carefully at what the report has said and obviously respond to it in due course.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Unlike the SNP, I do not want to see Britain rejoin the disastrous common fisheries policy, but I do have some

concerns about the fisheries aspects of the transitional agreement that has been provisionally agreed with the European Union. Before she travels to the European Council, will the Prime Minister reassure the House, and indeed fishing communities around the United Kingdom, that we will absolutely and unequivocally take back full control of our waters from 2021?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, the point about the implementation period is that it is the period during which people are able to make the changes necessary for the new partnership we will have. It ensures that businesses, fishermen included, do not face two cliff-edge changes in the way they are operating. By definition—because it is maintaining, as far as possible, the status quo, so that people do not have to make those extra changes—I recognise that it is not the same and will not be the same as the end state when we are able to have a future economic partnership and have a new relationship. As I said earlier, one of the elements that we will be looking for in reassuring the fishing industry and providing for the fishing industry is to ensure that we do take back control of our waters.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the SNP in offering condolences to the family of the Royal Air Force engineer who was tragically killed in my constituency yesterday? The RAF has been part of my constituency for over 75 years, with a tight-knit group of aircraftmen and support staff on the ground. While they are grieving, will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to the RAF as it commemorates its century of dedicated service to our country?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join the hon. Gentleman in saying what a great job the Royal Air Force does for us; of course he sees it at first hand, given its connection with his constituency. We should recognise the valour of all those who are serving in our armed forces—particularly, in this 100th year of the Royal Air Force, those who serve in the Royal Air Force. We thank them for it.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): May I welcome the Government's decision to create a medical school at Canterbury in east Kent, which was fought for by all Kent's MPs—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), who has been indefatigable in that fight? Does this not underline the importance of training more doctors and nurses, to ensure that our health services in the regions are well staffed and looked after?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am pleased to welcome the new medical school in Canterbury, but also the four other new medical schools being set up around various parts of the country. He is also absolutely right that this is about ensuring that we are training a workforce for our national health service. We have raised significantly the number of training places—I think it is probably the biggest increase in training places that the NHS has seen for some considerable time.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Given that mesh can shrink, degrade or twist in a woman's body, may I ask the Prime Minister whether she will support proposals to “sling the mesh”?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that this is a very real, important issue that has been raised. It is one of a number of women's health issues that have been raised in this House that are causing concern to women. I will look in detail at it. I am happy to write to the hon. Lady about this, but I recognise the concern that there is about this particular issue. I am happy to write to her about what the national health service will be doing on it.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend congratulate the remarkable staff of Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow, who have ensured that the hospital is out of special measures today, following a report from the Care Quality Commission? Will she support our campaign for a new hospital to ensure that the staff have a hospital fit for the 21st century?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate the local hospital in Harlow that my right hon. Friend has referred to on coming out of those special measures. I think that is very important and I know it will give added confidence to his constituents. He tempts me to support a new hospital in his area. As he will know, the Secretary of State has heard his request, but what we do know is that we are putting more money into the national health service to ensure that we do get the best possible services provided to people through our national health service.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Before we proceed to next business, I take this opportunity to remind the House that tomorrow we will be commemorating the Westminster terrorist attack of a year ago, reference to which was made earlier. I propose that we begin our proceedings tomorrow after prayers with a minute's silence in memory of those who died. There will also be, colleagues, a commemorative event in Westminster Hall at 12 noon and services in the chapel of St Mary Undercroft at 10 am, 2 pm and 6 pm. I hope that is helpful to colleagues.

Although points of order ordinarily come after urgent questions or statements, I understand that this inquiry appertains to exchanges with the Prime Minister. I am not sure whether that was today or on a previous occasion, but let us hear from the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh).

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It does particularly relate to today's session because police funding was referenced by the Prime Minister today. You may have seen that the UK Statistics Authority issued a statement yesterday reprimanding the Prime Minister, the Leader of the House and the Home Office for making statements that “could have led the public to conclude incorrectly that central government is providing an additional £450 million for police spending” this year. Given that the “Ministerial Code” requires that Ministers correct “any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity”,

would it not have been appropriate for the Prime Minister to apologise to this House and the public for inadvertently misleading us in Prime Minister's questions?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. I confess that I had not seen the UK Statistics Authority communication to which she referred, but obviously her beady eye has focused on it. What I would say to her in respect of the conduct of Ministers is that, as applies to all right hon. and hon. Members, those Ministers are responsible for their own conduct. If they judge that they have made a mistake—communicated incorrect information to the House that has given an incorrect impression—it is incumbent on them to correct the record, but it is not for the Speaker to be the arbiter of whether that is required. To judge by the puckish grin on the hon. Lady's face, I think she is well familiar with that point, but she has registered her point with her usual force. Doubtless it will be communicated to the people of Sheffield, Heeley and elsewhere.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, and to your wise words and guidance, you will recall that in business questions last week I specifically said to the Leader of the House that

there was growing concern that although Ministers are properly accountable to this place and can be called if they have said anything that is not accurate, that does not extend to Opposition Members.

Yet again in Prime Minister's questions, we have had assertions from right hon. and hon. Opposition Members of facts that are disputed. Mr Speaker, I do not expect you to give any ruling now—you cannot—but would it be in order for the House to consider how we ensure that we report things factually and that any means of challenge extends to the Opposition as well as to the Government?

Mr Speaker: I shall always profit by the right hon. Lady's counsels and I am grateful to her for offering them. Off the top of my head, I would say that the assertion of disputable facts is the very essence of politics. The assertion by one Member of something as fact that is contradicted or questioned by another Member is not a novel phenomenon in the House of Commons. I think we will have to leave it there for today.

The right hon. Lady raised a wider point appertaining to social networking sites, at or after business questions last Thursday, to which I gave a fairly comprehensive reply that can always be consulted by Members in the unlikely event that they have nothing better to do.

NHS Staff Pay

12.52 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on NHS pay.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The whole House will want to pay tribute to the hard work of NHS staff up and down the country during one of the most difficult winters in living memory. Today's agreement on a new pay deal reflects public appreciation for just how much they have done and continue to do, but it is much more than that. The agreement that NHS trade unions have recommended to their members today is a something for something deal that brings in profound changes in productivity in exchange for significant rises in pay.

The deal will ensure better value for money from the £36 billion NHS pay bill, with some of the most important changes to working practices in a decade, including a commitment to work together to improve the health and wellbeing of NHS staff to bring sickness absence in line with the best in the public sector. We know that NHS sickness rates are around a third higher than the public sector average, and reducing sickness absence by just 1% in the NHS will save around £280 million. The deal will put appraisal and personal development at the heart of pay progression, with often automatic incremental pay replaced by larger, less frequent pay increases based on the achievement of agreed professional milestones. It includes a significantly higher boost to lower-paid staff, to boost recruitment in a period when we know the NHS needs a significant increase in staffing to deal with the pressures of an ageing population. Pay rises range from 6.5% to 29% over three years, with much higher rises targeted on those on the lowest and starting rates of pay.

As part of the deal, the lowest starting salary in the NHS will increase by more than £2,500, from £15,404 this year to £18,040 in 2020-21, and a newly qualified nurse will receive starting pay 12.6%—nearly £3,000—higher in 2020-21 than this year. But this deal is about retention as well as recruitment. It makes many other changes that NHS staff have been asking for—such as shared parental leave and the ability to buy extra or sell back annual leave—so they can better manage their work and family lives, work flexibly and balance caring commitments.

The additional funding that Chancellor announced in the Budget to cover this deal—an estimated £4.2 billion over three years—cements the Government's commitment to protecting services for NHS patients, while recognising the work of NHS staff up and down the country. This is only possible because of the balanced approach we are taking—investing in our public services and helping families with the cost of living, while getting our debt falling. Rarely has a pay rise been so well deserved for NHS staff, who have never worked harder.

Jonathan Ashworth: The Secretary of State has finally given the lowest-paid NHS staff a pay rise. Staff, royal colleges, trade unions and the Labour party have today been vindicated in saying that a pay rise is long overdue.

But when we have seen nurses, paramedics and midwives losing thousands of pounds from the value of their pay, heard stories of NHS staff turning to food banks, have 100,000 vacancies across the service, seen more nurses leaving the profession than entering and seen trusts spending billions of pounds on agency staff, this pay cap should have been scrapped years ago.

In the general election, Ministers said that scrapping the pay cap was nonsensical. When a nurse pleaded with the Prime Minister for a pay rise on national television, she was told that there was no magic money tree. Can the Secretary of State tell us how this pay rise will be paid for? Have the Prime Minister's horticultural skills grown said magic money tree? We have heard that there will be additional money. When will trusts get the allocations, and if the money is additional, will it be paid for by extra borrowing or extra taxation? Public servants deserve reassurances that the Government will not give with one hand and take with the other.

Given the projections for inflation, can the Secretary of State guarantee that staff will not face a real-terms pay cut in any single year of the deal? We note that he has backed down on docking a day's holiday. Will he commit to not tabling that proposal again? We also note that he will not block the transfer of hospital staff to wholly owned subsidiary companies. Will he at least guarantee that all staff employed by such companies will be covered by "Agenda for Change" terms? Can he tell us when the rest of the public sector will get a pay deal?

NHS pay has been held back for the best part of a decade. Today is a first step, but the NHS remains underfunded and understaffed. We urgently need a plan to give the NHS the funding it needs for the future.

Mr Hunt: If the hon. Gentleman wants a plan to give the NHS the funding it needs, can he explain why Labour in Wales has deprived the NHS of £1 billion of funding that it would have had if funding had increased at the same rate as in England? Far from Labour being vindicated, the House will remember that the pay restraint in the NHS for the past eight years was caused by the worst financial recession since the second world war, caused by a catastrophic loss of control of public finances.

The hon. Gentleman asks for some details. Today's pay deal means that someone starting work in the NHS as a healthcare assistant will see their rate of pay over the next three years go up by 26%, nearly £4,000. A nurse with three years' experience will see a 25% increase, which is more than £6,000 over three years. A band 6 paramedic with four years' experience will see a £4,000 rise. On top of that, we are putting in a huge number of things that NHS staff will welcome, including, for example, statutory child bereavement leave and shared parental leave. Yes, we are asking for important productivity changes in return, but this is about the modernisation of NHS staff terms and conditions, which is good for them and good for taxpayers.

The hon. Gentleman asks where the money is coming from: it is additional funding from the Treasury for the NHS. It is not coming from extra borrowing. If he had been listening to the autumn statement, he would have heard that debt as a proportion of GDP is starting to fall this year for the first time. That is possible because we have taken very difficult decisions over the past eight

years—they were opposed by the Labour party—that have meant 3 million more jobs and have transformed our economy out of recession into growth. None of that would have been possible if we did what his party is now advocating, which is to lose control of public finances by increasing borrowing by £350 billion. Let us just remind ourselves that countries that lose control of their finances do not put more money into their health services—they put less. In Portugal, the amount is down 17%, and in Greece, it is down 39%. The reason that we can announce today's deal is very simple: this country is led by a Government who know that only a strong economy gives us a strong NHS.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I warmly welcome today's announcement of a well-deserved pay rise for NHS staff and, in particular, that this will be additional funding of £4.2 billion over three years, rather than it coming out of existing resources. I particularly welcome the focus on staff health and wellbeing, which was raised by the recent Health Committee inquiry into the nursing workforce. In particular, I ask the Secretary of State to go further and talk about what will be done on continuing professional development for NHS staff, because this was identified as a key factor in retention. He referred to it partially in his comments, but I wonder whether he could go further.

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. Underneath this agreement, there is a very important new partnership between NHS employers and the unions to improve the health and wellbeing of staff through mental health provision and the implementation of the Stevenson-Farmer review, taking on board a number of points raised by the Health Committee, and through improved support for people with musculoskeletal conditions, because a lot of NHS work is very physical. However, she is absolutely right: professional development is also very important. By reforming the increments system that we have been using for many years, we will give staff the chance to see their pay go up in a way that is linked to their skills going up as well. That is something that many staff will welcome.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May I associate myself with the comments made by the Secretary of State in paying tribute to our NHS staff? It is good to have not just warm words today, but substantive action. He has referred to devolved nations elsewhere in the UK, and I hope that he will acknowledge that the Scottish Government were the first Government in the UK to lift the public sector pay cap.

Although this announcement is welcome, we have committed to using any additional funds that come to Scotland through consequential to go into the Scottish pay agreement. However, the Office for Budget Responsibility has projected that average earnings will go up by 7.7% in the next three years, while the retail prices index goes up by over 9%. Has the Secretary of State taken that into account, or are the Government ignoring the OBR on average earnings? Committing to a three-year deal could stagnate wages and lower the standard of living, and none of us in this House wants that to happen.

Mr Hunt: The majority of NHS staff will see that their pay is protected against the cost of living, but many NHS staff, including the lowest-paid, will see

increases that are substantially higher than inflation rates, because, first, that is the kind of society that we believe in. Conservative Members want everyone to be given decent rates of pay, and there are many parts of the country where the cost of living is very high and this will make a very big difference. We also recognise that there will be 1 million more over-75s in 10 years' time, so we need to expand the number of staff in the NHS and its capacity to deal with those pressures. We therefore need to attract more people into working for the NHS and social care systems.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend; I know of his huge personal commitment to the NHS and how he has battled for it over the years—I have seen that personally. I unashamedly, absolutely agree that this is a very good deal, and I congratulate nurses and others on this pay rise, which they deserve and for which they have worked very hard. Is it not also right to recognise and remember that back in 2008-09, Labour's great depression plunged the economy into the biggest and most difficult economic trench that it has faced? As a result of our stewardship and our support of the NHS through that period, unlike many other countries that cut their health spending, we secured 200,000 jobs in the NHS, and now we can start rewarding staff for their hard work.

Mr Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend and commend him on his courage in putting through some incredibly challenging and important reforms to our welfare state, when many people said that it was nigh on impossible. He is right: the biggest and most misleading thing that we hear is the charge that in austerity Britain, the NHS budget has been cut. In fact, the countries that cut their health budgets were Portugal and Greece—countries that are following precisely the policies that are advocated by the Opposition. In this country—so-called austerity Britain—NHS spending has gone up by 9%.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): On the vexed question of how to pay for the NHS, has the Secretary of State been in any way influenced by the testimony of the recently retired permanent secretary to the Treasury, who at last acknowledged that the only way to do it was to have some form of earmarked taxation?

Mr Hunt: The former permanent secretary to the Treasury is an extremely wise and experienced public servant, and I always listen to what he says with a great deal of interest.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I have met many nurses from Taunton Deane to press their case for a rise in salary, and I have passed that on not just to the Department of Health and Social Care, but to the Chancellor. I welcome today's pay rise; I think these hard-working nurses all deserve it, and we congratulate them. Does my right hon. Friend agree that today's £4 billion commitment demonstrates that this is a listening Government who are taking investment in the health service extremely seriously?

Mr Hunt: I very much enjoyed meeting nurses and staff at Musgrove Park Hospital when my hon. Friend invited me there recently. I know that they will welcome

[Mr Hunt]

today's deal and they would welcome even more investment in their operating theatres, which she is campaigning for assiduously.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): We have lost over 5,000 nurses working in mental health since 2010. As a result of this announcement on pay, when does the Secretary of State expect the number of mental health nurses to return to 2010 levels?

Mr Hunt: We would have more nurses in mental health if we had not had to deal with the crisis at Mid Staffs and pronounced short staffing in our acute hospitals. Since I have been Health Secretary, we have 15,000 more nurses in the NHS and we are also finding more money to go into mental health. It is time that the hon. Lady recognised that, rather than trying to paint the opposite picture.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I add my voice to those congratulating the Secretary of State and his ministerial team on a tremendous achievement in discussions with the Treasury to secure this additional funding. I invite him to comment on the work that has been done by the health unions and the Royal College of Nursing, in particular, in helping to deliver this agreement and particularly to give many of the people on starting salaries a significant uplift, which he referred to earlier. This will make it easier to attract people to the vital starting roles for future generations.

Mr Hunt: I would like to pay tribute to my hon. Friend because, when he was working in my Department, he laid a lot of foundations for this deal. He chaired some very important meetings. In particular, one of the most important areas of consensus that has emerged, which he should take enormous credit for, is that we are saying today that the minimum salary for anyone working in the NHS will go up by £2,000. That is going to make a huge difference—100,000 people will benefit from that important change—and he should be very proud of that.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): NHS trusts are spending £3 billion a year on agency staff to plug gaps in the workforce. Has the pay cap not been totally self-defeating and led to huge amounts of public money going to private staffing agencies?

Mr Hunt: What led to the mushrooming agency fee was the realisation, post Mid Staffs, that we needed a lot more nurses. Nursing staff numbers were going down until the Francis report was published, but the report created huge demand among hospitals, which realised they needed to improve patient safety by recruiting more staff. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know, however, that we are bringing down the agency bill, and I expect it to be significantly lower this year.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is disappointing to see the lack of welcome from Labour Members for this pay rise for NHS staff in England—one day after the announcement of five new medical schools across the country. Has the Secretary of State had discussions with the Labour Government in Wales to see if they will be replicating this pay rise for NHS staff in Wales?

Mr Hunt: First, I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend as one of the practising nurses in the House and someone who always makes sure that the voice of nursing is heard loud and proud in this place. I very much hope that the devolved Governments will follow suit with this deal, although for every additional pound per head we have put into the NHS in England, Labour in Wales has put in only 57p.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), we all know how much agency nurses cost the NHS, and the same goes for private finance initiatives. These companies are making £1 billion in profits, which is money that will not touch any of our hospital budgets, including that of my own, Whipps Cross Hospital, which has a 17% agency rate and tried to deal with its PFI debt by downgrading the pay of nurses to save money. What is the Secretary of State doing to cut the PFI bill for our hospitals and prevent them from balancing their books off the backs of hard-working staff?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to that problem. We have certainly stopped doing any new PFI deals of the disastrous kind that lead to the consequences she talks about. We have given some relief to a number of hospitals in that area, but I will look again at her local hospital, because it is clearly totally unacceptable if that is happening.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Colchester General Hospital has recently come out of special measures, and the staff there have worked so hard to turn our hospital around, so I welcome wholeheartedly this announcement of extra money, which means that our staff will get a well-deserved pay rise. I will always champion our hospital, however, so will my right hon. Friend commit to continuing to invest in our hospital and its people? In particular, will he look at the accident and emergency department?

Mr Hunt: I will happily do that. The hon. Gentleman has championed his hospital, which has been on a rollercoaster journey during his time in this House but which has now turned a corner. The staff have worked incredibly hard to improve safety standards for patients, but I know that, like many places, they would like more investment in their A&E, and I will certainly look at it.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I, like many others, welcome the fact that NHS workers in England will finally receive a pay rise they deserve. Of course, health is devolved to the Welsh Government, so could the Secretary of State clarify how much of this additional funding is new funding and what the Barnett consequential will be for the Welsh Government?

Mr Hunt: This constitutes an investment by the Treasury of £4.2 billion, and the normal Barnett consequentials will apply, so it is perfectly possible for the Labour Government in Wales to replicate this deal if they choose to, but we know, of course, that had they replicated the increases in funding to the NHS in England, the NHS in Wales would have had an additional £1 billion spent on it over the past five years.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) *rose—*

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: I see that two doctors are standing on the Government Back Benches. I am sure that the House will understand if I call the medic rather than the military strategist.

Dr Murrison: I warmly welcome this announcement and congratulate my right hon. Friend, the trade unions and NHS Employers on reaching this deal. One problem facing our NHS is that of people not returning to work after they have had caring responsibilities. What elements of the deal will encourage more people to consider coming back into the workforce? I am thinking, in particular, of the non-pay elements and the reform of pay structures that he has mentioned.

Mr Hunt: The most important thing about the deal is that it will discourage people who might be reaching breaking point, because of personal circumstances, from packing it all in and leaving the NHS family. There is a particular proposal to allow much greater flexibility in the buying and selling of annual leave, so that people who need to work less because of things that happen at home, and perhaps people who want to work more, find it much easier to do so. This is therefore part of a much bigger shift towards the flexible working that we know everyone wants these days.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I absolutely appreciate the Secretary of State's announcement on pay. As a nurse who has worked for more than 40 years, I know that it is greatly welcomed by everybody across the patch, including porters. I want to ask, however, about wholly owned subsidiary staff. I believe that some of them are not under "Agenda for Change" terms. Will they get the pay rise as well?

Mr Hunt: First, I thank the hon. Lady for welcoming the deal. I think she is the first Labour Member who has done so, and it is not insignificant that she is a nurse. A wholly owned subsidiary is a legal structure that was made possible by a change in the law introduced in 2006, under her party's Government, and is actually an alternative to outsourcing. Employees would be far more likely to benefit from "Agenda for Change" pay rates within such a structure than if they were outsourced, which the last Labour Government tried so hard to encourage.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): When I met Devon's secretary of the Royal College of Nursing recently to discuss nurses' pay, she made the obvious point that she was getting a bit fed up with politicians saying that they valued nurses while not actually adding to their pay packets. Does my right hon. Friend agree that from today not only will we be saying that we value nurses, but that that will be reflected in their pay packets? I congratulate him and the RCN on achieving such a good deal.

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and I pay tribute to Janet Davies, the boss of the RCN, who has worked very hard to make this deal happen and in the best interests of her profession.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): My healthcare economy was held together over the winter solely by the good will of NHS workers, yet they have

had a 14% pay cut in real terms since 2010. This announcement is a drop in the ocean. How does the Secretary of State think that it will help retention rates?

Mr Hunt: I cannot agree that this is a drop in the ocean. If the hon. Lady does not want to hear it from me, let me point out what was said by the Unison head of health, Sara Gorton, who is also the head negotiator for the NHS unions. She said that the deal

"would go a long way towards making dedicated health staff feel more valued, lift flagging morale, and help turn the tide on employers' staffing problems."

That is not a drop in the ocean.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome the measures that my right hon. Friend has announced. He will have heard my question to the Prime Minister earlier, and he will acknowledge that Harlow Hospital is out of special measures and that this pay award is much deserved by staff. In the future, will he look at the particular problem we face—we are just outside London, and a lot of staff work in London, which makes it harder for Harlow Hospital to recruit—and perhaps think again about the pay scales?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that and to congratulate the staff at my right hon. Friend's hospital, which he has long championed and whose pressures and needs he has highlighted assiduously. To come out of special measures is a huge achievement. I have recorded a video message, but I am happy to say in the House how proud we all are of what the staff have achieved. I also recognise the capital issues at the hospital and the fact that the building is not fit for purpose.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The minimum amount that nurses in south Cumbria will have lost since the pay freeze is £4,306. Given that the average house price in my constituency is 10 times the value of the average nurse's salary, Members will understand the huge impact that there has been on retention and recruitment. The rise is therefore deserved, welcome and overdue, but without a long-term plan for funding health and social care, this announcement will not be trusted, so does the Secretary of State not agree that we need a new deal to refresh Beveridge's vision for the 21st century, and should we not be prepared to be honest with the British people and say that this will involve a modest but clear increase in taxation?

Mr Hunt: I disagree that the deal will not be believed—it is a concrete deal. NHS staff still have to vote for it, but the Government have committed to significant rises in pay. I agree, however, that we will need to find the best way of getting more money into the NHS and social care system as we face the pressures of an ageing population.

Dr Julian Lewis: Will the Secretary of State expand a little on what he briefly said about flexibility of working hours and family bereavement among NHS staff? After this urgent question, will he kindly give a short tutorial to those of us with an interest in defence on his successful techniques for extracting £5 billion from the Treasury for a Department that urgently needs it?

Mr Hunt: I would not dare to talk about an area outside my own Department's responsibilities, even to such an eminent person as my right hon. Friend.

Flexible pay is at the heart of what we need to do differently in the NHS. This is really about two types of NHS worker. First, many people find that the shift patterns in the NHS are very unpredictable. Every six weeks their lives are turned upside down as they are given a new set of times when they have to work. People want regularity and predictability, and we do not offer that at the moment, which makes life much tougher for those who are trying to achieve a work-life balance. Secondly, we make life hard for people who want to do extra shifts at the last minute. Both those factors are important, and they will be helped by this new pay deal.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): We have already heard about the 14% real-terms fall in NHS staff pay since 2010. There have been eight long years of pay restraint, and this deal does not go far enough to offset that historic deficit.

The Secretary of State is having to deal with the massive problem of an ageing population and the need to increase the capacity of the NHS to deal with it. Does he agree that alienating an entire generation of junior doctors was not a productive way of achieving that?

Mr Hunt: We do not recognise the figures that the hon. Gentleman has given but, in any event, he cannot say that the deal does not go far enough without asking why that has happened. It happened because in 2008 we had the worst financial recession since the second world war, which was made an awful lot worse by the Labour Government's loss of financial discipline. What I think is most disturbing for people in the NHS is that the hon. Gentleman's party seems set on repeating the same mistake.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I join colleagues in welcoming my right hon. Friend's announcement. Will he join me in congratulating the nurses and doctors at the Alexandra Hospital in Redditch on their incredibly hard work in keeping people safe and well cared for throughout the winter? Following yesterday's announcement about new medical schools and nursing apprenticeships, his announcement today represents a real, solid investment in our NHS workforce that will enable us to open the urgent care centre at the Alex for which I have been campaigning.

Mr Hunt: I certainly recognise my hon. Friend's strong argument for an urgent care centre, and I commend the very hard work of the staff at the Alex. I know that the new leadership at the trust is making progress and turning things around, and I hope that what has happened at Harlow today will be an inspiration.

What we are doing today is significant. The extra doctors and nurses whom we are training, and a pay deal that is intended to boost recruitment in the NHS, demonstrate our recognition that we need a significant increase in capacity in the NHS and the social care system if we are to ensure that every older person gets the care that they really need, which is what the Government want.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State a little further on Barnett consequential? Will he confirm that there will be consequential for each of

the three years of the pay rise? Will he also welcome the Welsh Government's introduction of a living wage in the NHS in 2014, and does he recognise that NHS and social care spending is higher in Wales than it is in England? That is a matter of fact.

Mr Hunt: What is a matter of fact is that the NHS in Wales would have £1 billion more if the Welsh Government had matched the increases that have taken place in England and that Welsh patients waiting for both elective and emergency care are 40% more likely to wait too long.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I have the great good fortune to be married to a former renal nurse, and she tells me regularly that much of retention is about work-life balance, training and interactions with management. Will the Secretary of State tell us what progress he is making in those areas?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do so. Work-life balance is something that we need to handle a lot better. I think we have been slow to recognise that today's NHS staff are likely to live in households in which both partners are working and that juggling life and work has therefore become much more complex than it was 30 or 40 years ago. The reform of the increments system means that there will be more focus on training and skills, which will be much more motivating for NHS staff, so I hope that my hon. Friend's wife is pleased.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I welcome the Government's change of heart in awarding a pay rise to our hard-working NHS staff. May I pursue the point made by the Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston)? Our Committee's report emphasised that continuing professional development was key to the retention of nurses. It was not clear to me from what the Secretary of State said whether money would be ring-fenced—sadly, the amount has been cut—to ensure that nurses can access CPD not only in the NHS, but in social care settings.

Mr Hunt: I recognise that there have been pressures on the CPD budget, and that is because we have made increasing the number of nurse training places our main priority. We have increased that by 25%, which has meant that difficult decisions have had to be made about other parts of the budget. I can reassure the hon. Lady, however, that I think that CPD will continue to have a vital role, and we will need to return to the issue.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Efficiency and productivity deserve to be rewarded, and, given the 16% increase in emergency admissions, NHS professionals have certainly earned that. In the light of this new working relationship, does the Secretary of State envisage staff and the Government working in partnership to challenge patients to be more respectful to those who work in the health service?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. He often raises difficult issues that need to be talked about in this place. We all know that the vast majority of patients are incredibly grateful for the care that they receive from NHS professionals, but occasionally that does not happen. Occasionally, people use services

that they do not need to use, which creates pressures and denies other patients what they do need. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that as we start to expand NHS capacity, we need the public to understand their responsibilities as well.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am happy to welcome the statement, but let me take a moment to remind the Secretary of State that we in Northern Ireland have not had a functioning Assembly for 14 months, and we have had no Health Minister for 14 months. How can the hard-working staff members of the NHS in Northern Ireland benefit from the new pay deal? Will the Secretary of State commit himself to speaking to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, whom I am delighted to see sitting on the Front Bench, to ensure that NHS staff in Northern Ireland see the benefits of the deal?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady speaks eloquently and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was listening to her comments. It is a matter of great sadness that nurses' pay has fallen behind in Northern Ireland, not because the money was not available, but simply because the Administration were not in place to implement changes. I know that my right hon. Friend will do everything she can.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome the proposed pay rise, especially the increase for the lowest paid in the NHS. Nurses at my local hospitals tell me that as well as a pay rise, what they really want is flexibility in relation to things that happen in their lives, so I particularly welcome that aspect of the proposal. Does my right hon. Friend agree that flexibility and investment in training will enable NHS employers to show their appreciation for the valuable contribution that each individual member of staff makes to the care of patients?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and speaks with a great deal of knowledge. Let me give an example of something we are doing that is not part of this deal, but that backs up what she says. We are prioritising the use in every hospital of an effective e-rostering system that enables people to book the shifts that they want on their phones and to change them very easily through a modern IT system. That makes an enormous difference to the control that they have over the hours they work, and I think that, in combination with the new deal, that will make a big difference.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The NHS is now short of 100,000 staff because of the Government's neglect of the NHS workforce. When the Government scrapped the nursing bursary, they said that that would lead to the training of more nurses, but UCAS data shows that since then the number of applications has fallen by 15,000. Will the Government now commit themselves to reintroducing the bursary?

Mr Hunt: What the hon. Lady chose not to tell the House was that since the time of the last Labour Government, we now have 5,500 more nurses and 15,000 more doctors in the NHS, and there has been a 9% rise in NHS funding. *[Interruption.]* I hear the shadow Secretary of State talking about vacancies from a sedentary

position. I hope that he will also welcome the 25% increase in the number of doctors and nurses whom we are training precisely so that we can fill those vacancies.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I welcome the announcement, and it was great to see the Secretary of State meeting staff at my excellent local hospital, the George Eliot, recently. What will be particularly welcomed is the hugely progressive nature of this deal, with its focus on the lowest paid. What exactly does it mean for those at the very bottom of the pay scale?

Mr Hunt: For people starting off in nursing, there will be a rise of about £2,000, which will make a very big difference, and we are increasing the minimum starting salary for anyone working in the NHS by about £2,500. This is completely in line with the Government's policies over a whole range of areas. We have prioritised increasing the amount people can earn tax-free before paying any income tax at all. We have taken millions of people out of income tax. That is because this Government are committed to helping the lowest paid.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It has taken six years, but finally the Health Secretary has come to the conclusion that Labour Members reached many years ago: the pay cap is a folly. I thank Sara Gorton and the team at Unison and the GMB for campaigning on this matter for years, standing up not just for clinical staff, but for the support staff without whom our NHS simply would not function. Given that the offer in the second and third years of the pay deal is below inflation, what guarantees can the Secretary of State give that this is not a one-off deal to hide the fact that he is failing in his job, and is instead a long-term engagement to achieve proper pay in our NHS?

Mr Hunt: If the hon. Gentleman thinks the pay freeze was a folly, why does he support policies that would increase borrowing by £350 billion and potentially lead to another financial crisis and pay freeze?

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I welcome the announcement and believe that it is a further obvious commitment by the Government to the NHS and NHS staff. I will continue to have a debate on whether the record spending is enough, as, personally, I would support more spending, but does the Secretary of State share my disappointment and anger that there continue to be campaigners and campaigning organisations that, for whatever reasons and motivations, spread the untruth that there have been cuts in spending in the NHS?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right. Just to reassure him, I do not think that any Health Secretary would ever say the NHS does not need additional funding. He makes an important point, and the truth is that at the 2010 election there was one party that wanted to cut funding for the NHS. It was the Labour party, and we stopped it.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): When my sister broke her neck only weeks ago, I saw at first hand the pressures that NHS staff are under. They start shifts early and finish shifts late, and there are not the right staffing levels on wards. Those staff were amazing, however. The NHS is now short of 100,000 staff because

[Vicky Foxcroft]

of this Government's neglect of the NHS workforce. Will the Government apologise to all NHS workers for undervaluing them for so long?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady needs to look at the facts before making those kinds of claims. Let us look at what has happened in the last five years—the period during which I have been Health Secretary. The numbers of qualified clinical staff have not gone down, but have gone up by 43,000. We are doing everything we can to increase the capacity of the NHS, and the hon. Lady should be welcoming that.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State's statement. I met representatives from the Royal College of Nursing in my constituency recently, and I am sure that they, too, will welcome this statement. Does this not show that, contrary to the assertion so often made by Labour, it is this Government and Secretary of State who are committed to long-term investment in our NHS?

Mr Hunt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for saying that. The truth is that there is probably one thing that those on both sides of the House agree on: the long-term future of the NHS depends on long-term funding for the NHS. Sadly, there is one thing that only Conservative Members understand: to do that, we need a strong economy.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome the statement. Has the Secretary of State had time to assess the impact on retention and recruitment of EU citizens who work in the NHS? If he is feeling generous, may I remind him that St Helier Hospital is in need of £400 million?

Mr Hunt: I am aware of the estate issues at St Helier Hospital. I have seen them myself and know that that building is, in many areas, not fit for purpose. On EU citizens, the picture is mixed. We have seen a small decline in the number of EU nurses, but overall the number of EU citizens working in the NHS has gone up by 3,200 since the referendum. That has happened because the Government and NHS staff have made a huge effort to reassure them of just how valued they are and that we want them to stay.

Points of Order

1.34 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In a parliamentary written answer on 12 January 2018 the Minister for the Armed Forces stated:

"The UK will remain completely committed to European defence and security after we leave the European Union", yet 48 hours ago it was announced that the UK is withdrawing from providing the battle group in 2019. Is there a way in which I can hold the Government to account on what appears to be a substantial policy change, which has not been announced in this place but has in fact been announced as a result of a leak to a newspaper?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he planned to raise this matter, and I know that he has been vigorous in pursuing the issue through parliamentary questions. As he knows, there are many other routes that he can pursue, including, I am sure, forthcoming Government statements on, for example, the European Council, but his concern will have been heard on the Treasury Bench and I am sure it will be taken back to the Department concerned.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. While we are on the subject of the European Union and defence, may I seek an assurance that Mr Speaker will not be emulating the example of the President of the European Commission, who has just sent a grovelling letter of congratulations to Vladimir Putin on his election victory, and that he will note instead how fortunate we are to be able to depend on NATO when the security and defence of this country is at stake?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I suspect that Mr Speaker will have very firm ideas, no doubt taking some advice from the right hon. Gentleman himself, about how he will respond to that election.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At Health questions yesterday, I asked the Secretary of State when the independent reconfiguration panel report about the future of Huddersfield Royal Infirmary, our local hospital, would be presented. The response was that it would be produced "in due course", and the same response was given to my written question of last month. May I have clarification about the definition of "due course": is that within a week, within a month, or after the next local elections?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice that she wished to raise this matter, which I will answer now rather than in due course. I know that it can be rather frustrating for Members when Ministers say no more than "in due course" when asked when something is going to happen; however, I am afraid that the content of Ministers' answers is for Ministers, not the Chair, and I cannot attempt to define what was meant by that. Again, though, I would say

that the hon. Member has made her dissatisfaction clear, and it will have been heard on the Treasury Bench and, I hope, will be reported back.

BILLS PRESENTED

NORTHERN IRELAND (REGIONAL RATES AND ENERGY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Karen Bradley, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Attorney General and Mr Shailesh Vara presented a Bill to make provision about the regional rate in Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2019; and amend the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time today, and to be printed (Bill 188).

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY MEMBERS (PAY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Karen Bradley, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Attorney General and Mr Shailesh Vara presented a Bill to confer power on the Secretary of State to determine salaries and other benefits for Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly in respect of periods when there is no Executive.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time today, and to be printed (Bill 187).

Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Welfare of Women)

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

1.39 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 to make provision about the welfare of women undergoing any medical, surgical or obstetric treatment services provided for the purpose of assisting such women to carry children; and for connected purposes.

I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I would like to begin by thanking right hon. and hon. female Members from throughout the Chamber for supporting the Bill, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), my hon. Friends the Members for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), my hon. Friends the Members for Westminster North (Ms Buck), for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) and for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), my right hon. Friends the Members for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), who herself worked in a fertility clinic before joining us in the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker, 26 years ago the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority was established to regulate the new frontier of medicine brought forth by in vitro fertilisation. The sector has subsequently transformed into a multimillion-pound industry, with more than 5 million children having been conceived thanks to IVF. Because of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008, the HFEA rightly works to protect the welfare of children before providing IVF treatment, and it is fundamental that this should continue. Notably, however, there is an absence of provisions in the Act regarding the welfare of the women who are undergoing the treatment. As a result of the huge increase in the use of IVF, not only by women who have problems conceiving but by those such as single women and same-sex couples, we have a dawning understanding of the prevalence of cancer diagnosis among women who have gone through IVF. In the light of the overwhelming evidence that drug protocols can cause women extremely adverse health effects, including a risk to life, I believe that there is a clear case for amending the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act to ensure the welfare of women.

One of the main health risks to women undergoing IVF is ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome, or OHSS. It is triggered by the over-stimulation of the ovaries caused by hormones injected during IVF treatment. However, as the Act does not explicitly make stipulations about the welfare of the woman, the HFEA is unable to

[Siobhain McDonagh]

monitor or regulate guidelines on clinical practices relating to the administration of drugs and dosages during IVF treatment. There is therefore a total lack of monitoring and control of the drugs given to women.

One third of women undergoing IVF suffer from some form of OHSS. In severe cases, there is clinical evidence of fluid in the abdomen and chest, a reduction in urine output, a significant disturbance of blood biochemistry and a thickening of the blood, with an imbalance of the clotting system. It can even be critical, causing a woman to have renal shutdown and the fluid in her abdomen and chest to be so severe that it causes her to have respiratory distress syndrome. I have chosen to describe the symptoms graphically because I believe that all Members should be aware of the devastating nature of this preventable condition. A staggering 3% to 8% of women will suffer from moderate to severe OHSS during a cycle of treatment, and it can be life-threatening. Scientific studies have even indicated about three deaths per 100,000 cycles of stimulated IVF treatments. Let me clarify that: critical OHSS has caused women to die right here in the UK, but the outdated measures in the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act prohibit us from understanding the true scale of the issue and preventing it in the first place.

It is accepted that almost all women with critical or severe OHSS, and some with moderate OHSS, will require hospital admission, and current regulation dictates that this should be reported as an adverse incident to the HFEA. The HFEA should then work in collaboration with the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency on dealing with the adverse effects of drugs used in IVF treatment. So clinics are required to report to the HFEA any cases of severe OHSS occurring as a result of treatment, but there is powerful evidence of wholesale under-reporting. More than 67,000 cycles of IVF are carried out in the UK each year. A shocking investigation by the *Daily Mail* last year found that 836 emergency hospital admissions for severe OHSS had occurred during 2015, even though the HFEA database reported just 60. Furthermore, the evidence is clear that collecting more than 15 eggs during IVF indicates a significant risk of OHSS, yet the HFEA recorded that in 2012 more than 3,400 women had more than 20 eggs collected.

Such widespread evidence of the welfare of women being compromised is deeply disappointing, because OHSS is a preventable condition. There are reliable predictors that allow the adjustment of the dose of stimulation to prevent the vast majority of cases, with such treatment being equally successful in terms of live birth rates. Lowering the stimulating dose is a win-win situation for the woman, whose wellbeing is protected, and for the NHS, which does not have to foot the bill for treating emergency admissions.

When I brought this issue to Parliament in 2016, the then Under-Secretary of State for Health stated that women were warned of the potential risks before starting treatment. However, we are dealing with a vulnerable group of women who are desperate for a family and who are easily exploited by being told that the side effects of high ovarian stimulation are the price of success. That simply is not true. These are completely avoidable side effects that changes to the Act can and must prevent.

OHSS is not the only danger to women undergoing IVF. The use of off-label intravenous immunology drugs, which are potentially harmful and of no proven benefit, comes with a health warning from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. The HFEA collects no data on what drugs and drug dosages are administered to women undergoing IVF because the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act gives it no authority to do so. Furthermore, because of restrictions based on confidentiality for couples undergoing fertility treatment, the HFEA has no power to monitor the consequences of current treatments on the short-term and long-term health of the women. That has to change, because a voluntary reporting system simply does not work. Let me make this clear: this condition is life-threatening, and it is entirely preventable for the tens of thousands of women undergoing fertility treatment every single year. The lack of concern about the welfare of women during IVF treatment is a scandal that cannot continue to exist.

I should like to summarise the crucial amendments that I believe must be made to the Act. There should be an explicit added commitment to safeguard the welfare of women. The HFEA should be required to collect information about all drugs and dosages administered to women during IVF treatment and early pregnancy. Finally, the Act should be amended to link the HFEA registry with hospital, cancer and death registers, to enable the accurate recording and publication of the links between IVF treatment and incidences of severe OHSS, cancer and mortality among women. I sincerely hope that the House will recognise its duty to ensure that IVF continues to enable the celebration of new life, but not at the expense of the women who are undergoing it. It is 26 years since the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act was created, and it is high time that its inadequacies were reformed and the welfare of women recognised.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Siobhain McDonagh, Joan Ryan, Karen Lee, Emma Hardy, Layla Moran, Dame Caroline Spelman, Julie Elliott, Caroline Flint, Rosie Cooper, Ms Karen Buck, Dame Margaret Hodge and Liz Kendall present the Bill.

Siobhain McDonagh accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 June, and to be printed (Bill 189).

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance on a matter relating to Northern Ireland. Ordinarily, it is ruled out of order for Members to raise devolved issues, such as schools, hospitals and other important matters. However, given that the Assembly and Executive in Northern Ireland have not sat for more than 14 months, would it be in order to raise such matters in the Chamber in future during questions or debates?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he wished to raise that matter. In the first instance, I suggest that he discuss the issue with the Table Office. While the fundamental principle is that questions must relate to ministerial responsibilities, how that is interpreted is affected by the pattern of ministerial answers, and it may be that the changing circumstances mean that there will be some further changes.

NORTHERN IRELAND (REGIONAL RATES AND ENERGY) BILL (BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) Bill:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Notices of amendments, new Clauses or new Schedules to be moved in Committee of the whole House may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.

(c) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(d) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) If, following proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration of the Bill, a legislative grand committee withholds consent to the Bill or any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill, the House shall proceed to Reconsideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(5) If, following Reconsideration of the Bill—

(a) a legislative grand committee withholds consent to any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill (but does not withhold consent to the whole Bill), and

(b) a Minister of the Crown indicates his or her intention to move a minor or technical amendment to the Bill, the House shall proceed to consequential Consideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply—

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (17)(a) of this Order.

(7) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(8) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(9) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(d) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(10) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (11) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(12) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(13) Paragraphs (2) to (9) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (12) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(14) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(15) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply so far as necessary for the purposes of this Order.

(16) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(17) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(18) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(19) No debate shall be held in accordance with Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) at today's sitting after this Order has been agreed.

(20) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(21) No private business may be considered at today's sitting after this Order has been agreed.—(*Karen Bradley.*)

Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) Bill

Second Reading

1.52 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I start by wishing my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) an early happy birthday because I know that it is coming up. I am afraid that I will not be able to celebrate with him, but I wanted to wish him a happy birthday in the Chamber. I am sure that we will all join in wishing the former Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee a happy birthday.

As with the Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill that we introduced yesterday, I stand today to ask the House to give a Second Reading to legislation that is a necessary intervention to safeguard public services and finances in the ongoing absence of a Northern Ireland Executive and sitting Assembly. I covered the broader political situation in my statement last week, but it will be helpful to remind the House of the context in which we are taking forward this Bill today.

During the past 14 months, in the absence of an Executive and Assembly in Northern Ireland, the UK Government have worked tirelessly to facilitate the restoration of devolved government. It had been my firm hope that a new Executive would be in place to complete its own 2017-18 estimates process and to set their own budget for 2018-19, as well as to extend the current cost capping on the renewable heat incentive scheme. It was therefore with disappointment that I had to bring forward yesterday's Bill to put 2017-18 public spending on a legal footing.

As I set out in my statement on 8 March, there are acute pressures across public services to be addressed in 2018-19, which is why I took steps that day to provide clarity and certainty on Northern Ireland's finances for 2018-19. The Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) Bill seeks to build on that certainty, delivering on this Government's commitment to protect public services and to ensure good governance in Northern Ireland. Today, the focus is on taking forward key steps to provide support for public services and sustainable finances in Northern Ireland as we move into the next financial year.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend elaborate on something that the public may not be aware of? There are key decisions that ought to be taken and priorities that ought to be set, but that cannot happen because there is no ministerial grouping in Northern Ireland to make such decisions.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are decisions that ideally would be taken by Ministers sitting in Stormont as part of a devolved Government, but that has not been the case for 14 months. I am therefore taking steps today, reluctantly, and it is pressing that we are able to proceed. I hope that we can get devolved government in Stormont again in the near future, because that is the best thing for the people of Northern Ireland to be able to take advantage of the available opportunities.

Clause 1 addresses the collection of the regional rate, which represents more than 5% of the total revenue available to the Northern Ireland Executive. With a devolved Government in place, it would be set via an affirmative rates order in the Assembly, enabling bills to be issued in 10 instalments, providing certainty to ratepayers and allowing various payment reliefs to be applied. Last year, it fell to the UK Government to take that step in the absence of an Executive. When I took office as Secretary of State earlier this year, I had sorely hoped that it could be one of the first acts of a new devolved Government and Assembly and would not fall again to this Government and this Parliament to set the regional rates. That will not be possible before the next financial year, and it would be unacceptable to allow uncertainty to linger in the meantime until a new Executive are formed.

While we are clear that it is a devolved matter, we are also clear that only the UK Government and Parliament can take such action to secure the interests of individuals and businesses in Northern Ireland. This Bill therefore sets out rates, in pence-per-pound terms, for both domestic and non-domestic properties. For non-domestic properties, the rate reflects a 1.5% inflationary increase. For domestic properties, the rate would be raised by inflation—1.5%—plus 3%, as I set out in my budget statement on 8 March.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am sure the Secretary of State would like to confirm that she is well aware that the general public in Northern Ireland will not be one bit pleased that, when rates are going up in Northern Ireland, it is expected that Members of the Legislative Assembly will get a salary increase from 1 April, unless the Secretary of State exercises the power that she will take later this afternoon. Will she confirm that she will cut their salaries and eliminate any increase before 1 April?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady is pre-empting the speech that I will make later—I hope not in six hours' time—when I will be legislating to bring powers to this Parliament to vary the rates of MLA pay. I am doing so this week to ensure that it happens before the start of the new financial year, so that no pay increases go through. I well understand her strong feeling, which is one that has been expressed to me by many in Northern Ireland.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that the Assembly Commission, which comprises all the parties, recommended that she should take a power to ensure that the pay increase would not go ahead. That is the view of all the political parties in Northern Ireland. It is a sensible step, and we welcome what the Secretary of State is saying.

Karen Bradley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. He is right that it was cross-party, cross-community view that the pay rise should not go ahead, which is why we are legislating today.

Returning to domestic rates, I well understand the concerns that people will have, but this important measure will address a hole in the budget for 2018-19, so that public services can still be delivered. In my view, the measure represents an important contribution to delivering

a sustainable budget picture for 2018-19. As the budget consultation launched by the Northern Ireland civil service last year pointed out, there are important conversations to be had about the right balance in Northern Ireland between revenue raising and spending efficiencies, and that document discussed rises in regional rates of as much as 10% above inflation. Having reflected on conversations with the parties and stakeholders more broadly, and having understood the pressures on key services, I concluded that it was right that we ask households to pay a little more to help to protect and preserve public services.

However, I also considered that we had to balance that increase at the right level. That is why I propose a 3% on top of inflation rise—less than £1 a week for the average household—to help to address pressures in health, education and elsewhere. It is also why I have held business rates in line with inflation—within a broader budget envelope that allows the safeguarding of the small business rate relief—to keep a focus on the growth that Northern Ireland needs to see. That forms an important part, along with the flexibilities that we set out in last week's budget statement, of helping Northern Ireland to live within its means at a challenging time, maintaining the UK Government's responsibilities to uphold good governance in Northern Ireland.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree, in addition to the information that she is imparting to the House, that the onus falls on district councils as well because they set a district rate? If they are effective and efficient, the increase will be even less than she has indicated.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We all know that local government finances operate at both district and regional levels, and he is absolutely right to make the point that some of the regional rates paid by households go to district councils. It is important that they reflect the efficiencies that we are asking the rest of the civil service to reflect. As the Bill makes clear, nothing that we do would cut across the continuing right of the Executive to set a rate by order in the usual way. Should a devolved Government be restored in Stormont, they would therefore be able to make an Executive decision about the regional rate.

Clause 2 deals with the administration of Northern Ireland's renewable heat incentive scheme, which was established in 2012 to support efforts to increase uptake in the use of renewable energy. However, owing to incorrect assumptions about boiler size and usage, tariff levels and lack of cost controls led to substantial excess payments. Over the 20-year lifespan of the scheme, the projected overspend was well over £500 million, with £27 million of overspend in the 2016-17 year alone, putting the sustainable finances of the Northern Ireland Executive at significant risk.

As colleagues will be aware, the administration of the scheme and the circumstances that led to errors in its administration are subject to an ongoing public inquiry. One of the final acts of the last Executive was to introduce regulations in January last year that put in place robust cost controls. Those made sure that the costs were sustainable. They were put in place only for a year, to allow for longer-term consideration of the scheme as a whole.

Lady Hermon: Again, I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. Will she confirm for the benefit of people in Northern Ireland in particular the savings to the public purse as a result of the Bill? How much would it cost without a cap on the RHI scheme for another 12 months, compared with the measures in the Bill?

Karen Bradley: As I have said, the estimated saving for 2016-17 was £27 million. I assume a similar sort of saving this year. The total saving as a result of the cost capping is in the region of £450 million.

Nigel Dodds: The Secretary of State rightly said that this was a continuation of measures that were put in place by Simon Hamilton, the DUP Economy Minister, and which saved money last year. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Bill replicates the excellent legislation introduced by Mr Hamilton?

Karen Bradley: I can confirm that that is the case. We are following the same cost capping as was put in place by the Executive and Simon Hamilton as Economy Minister. The right hon. Gentleman will know the restrictions placed on this Parliament in terms of what we can do with changes, and we are very much guided by decisions taken in the last Executive. He will also know that since then there has not been an Executive to undertake that broader consideration of the right energy policy for Northern Ireland. We are now at the point where the existing cost controls are due to expire. If that happened, there would be no legal basis, not only for maintaining the current cost cap but for paying all those who receive payments under the scheme and whose installations were accredited before November 2015. Neither of these would be acceptable outcomes, nor would it be suitable for the Northern Ireland civil service to administer payments on an extra-statutory basis, which would create unnecessary legal uncertainty for all concerned.

That is why clause 2 ensures that the present cost controls, and the legal basis for payments, can continue for the 2018-19 financial year. As with the 2017 regulations, there is a sunset provision that expires after one year. This is a devolved policy matter, and it is right that the longer-term approach is one for a restored Executive to decide. In the meantime, I am assured that the Northern Ireland civil service will undertake detailed analysis to enable a new Executive to consider the right course for the future.

In summary, this is a modest Bill doing two discrete things. In setting a regional rate and extending the cost controls of the RHI scheme, it upholds our responsibilities to ensure good governance and to safeguard public services and finances in Northern Ireland. It does so in a way that continues our approach of intervening only as necessary to meet those aims, and only at a point at which it is critical that the measures are taken forward. I hope that colleagues across the House agree that it is important we now make progress to see these measures passed into law to put Northern Ireland on its strongest financial footing for the year ahead. The UK Government shall continue to meet our responsibilities to the people of Northern Ireland. To that end, I commend the Bill to the House.

2.5 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right that this is a modest Bill with relatively few clauses and few substantive measures. I thank her and her office for providing me with a draft copy yesterday evening, but it is a pretty poor showing that the rest of the House had precisely 10 minutes to look at the Bill before debating its contents, however modest they are. That does not strike me as a terribly long time to look at a measure that increases taxes on 1.8 million people in this country.

We support the Bill. As the Secretary of State said, it is a necessary measure to allow councils to raise the regional rate. It legislates in an area of clearly devolved competence, and it sets the regional rate at about 4.5%, which is above inflation. My first question—I hope that the Under-Secretary will be able to answer it at the end of the debate—is, how did the Government arrive at that figure? Was it discussed with political parties or with the Northern Ireland civil service, or, indeed, with local councils in Northern Ireland? The Secretary of State could have set a lower or a higher rate. How did she reach that figure?

Will the Secretary of State explain the cash impact on households in Northern Ireland? The explanatory notes are scant, so we do not have an impact assessment, and I do not think that anyone in Northern Ireland knows the net effect on average households. It would be useful to learn that.

The RHI measure was a poorly drawn piece of legislation. It is right that we are extending the cap again today. As the Secretary of State said, the liabilities for the taxpayer were potentially £500 million—some people have even said £700 million—so it is absolutely right that we should legislate to mitigate that figure. We are amending the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, which were laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly, passed and amended there. It is Northern Ireland legislation, and we support its further amendment today. However, that raises an important question relating to yesterday's debate that is vital in the halfway-house period—the limboland—for Northern Ireland. We have had 14 months without an Assembly or Executive, during which Ministers have not been accountable to people, either in Northern Ireland or in the House. We have legislation on issues that fall squarely within the devolved competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly when the Government choose to introduce them, but there are other issues on which the Government choose not to introduce measures. Yesterday, I mentioned the historical institutional abuse inquiry compensation scheme and the prospect of a pension for people who were severely disabled and injured in the troubles.

I was troubled by the answer that the Secretary of State gave to my question, in which she explained why she could not legislate on those things:

“Constitutionally, the inquiry”—

the HIA inquiry—

“was set up by the Executive and reported to the Executive. Unfortunately, the Executive were unable to take decisions on the recommendations before they collapsed...he”—

meaning me—

“will understand that the constitutional implications of the Westminster Parliament or Government taking a decision about something set up by a devolved institution mean that such decisions are not to be taken lightly.”—[*Official Report*, 20 March 2018; Vol. 638, c. 204.]

I completely accept that, but the Secretary of State is taking a decision—I presume not lightly—to legislate in other areas of devolved competence, including MLA pay, later today. We need to understand why it is deemed permissible to legislate in certain areas but not in others.

To that end, yesterday evening I commissioned the House of Commons Library and an independent Queen's counsel to provide legal advice to the House, and I will happily place those items in the Library later today. I asked them to explain what the difference might be, constitutionally and legislatively, between those two areas. The Library agreed with what I assumed would be the fairly standard interpretation, which is that there is no constitutional reason why the Secretary of State cannot legislate on historical institutional abuse or on the victims' pension—the pension for the severely injured and disabled. The Library says:

“As a matter of constitutional law, the UK Parliament can legislate with regard to any matter whatsoever in relation to Northern Ireland, relying on the principle of Parliamentary sovereignty.”

It goes on:

“If the Assembly is unable to introduce legislation, UK Government Ministers may decide that it is either necessary or expedient to ask Parliament to do so.”

Of course, they may decide it is not politically expedient to do so or not timely to introduce those things. That is what we are dealing with here—

Karen Bradley *rose—*

Owen Smith: I hope that when the Secretary of State intervenes she will explain that.

Karen Bradley: I wanted to make the point that although, constitutionally, this Parliament can legislate on any matters regarding the United Kingdom, where a matter had been devolved we would be undermining the devolution settlement—that is the point. It would be extraordinary for this Parliament to decide to legislate, unilaterally, where, for example, such an inquiry was set up by the Welsh Assembly or the Scottish Government. We do not take these things lightly and we need to give them great consideration, although I have enormous sympathy with the victims, in both cases.

The hon. Gentleman will know that I was in the Home Office at the time we set up the inquiry on institutional abuse across England and Wales. We carefully considered, and had many debates in the House on, whether the issues in Northern Ireland and the existing Hart inquiry should be brought into that inquiry, but the decision was taken that they should not, because the Executive had already set up the Hart inquiry.

Owen Smith: I thank the Secretary of State for that intervention, but she cannot have her cake and eat it. She cannot argue that it would undermine the devolution settlement to intervene and legislate in areas of devolved competence—for example, on the HIA or the pension for those who have been severely disabled—and then do so. She is doing precisely that today on the renewable heat incentive scheme, which was introduced in the Assembly, by the Assembly, for Northern Ireland, and on the regional rates, which is an area to do with local government that is entirely devolved to the Assembly in Belfast. One cannot have one's cake and eat it. One cannot speak out of both sides of one's mouth on this issue, and I fear that that is what the Government are seeking to do.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am listening to the hon. Gentleman's remarks with great interest. Where would he draw the line? Does he appreciate the dilemma the Government face in respect of the micromanagement and microgovernance of Northern Ireland, and dealing with the discrete and modest legislative vehicles—the Secretary of State made that clear—that we have to have to ensure that there is decent governance there? He has not said where he would draw that line and perhaps it might be timely if he did so.

Owen Smith: I am glad I gave way to the hon. Gentleman because he understands Northern Ireland and understands fully that this is delicate. I completely accept that the Secretary of State is in an invidious position on these conventions, but to an extent they are just that—conventions—with the key one being the Sewel convention, whereby, ordinarily, this Westminster Government do not legislate on areas of devolved competence. However, there are instances where it is morally or fiscally necessary to intervene and the Government do intervene.

It is, in essence, for the Government to choose where the line is set, but there are moral and fiscal imperatives in respect of those people who are in the HIAI and those who have been severely injured, and who ought to see the Government intervene on their behalf. If the Government were to do that, it would in no way undermine the devolution settlement because the precedent is already set, as we are seeing today on the RHI and as we have seen on other areas of legislation. Nor would it undermine the peace process and the talks process, because there is widespread support for those things. Legal counsel supports my opinion—

Dr Murrison *rose—*

Owen Smith: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman in a moment, because I want to complete this point. I sought some support from KRW Law, a firm of lawyers at the Bar in Belfast. Its view is:

“There are three significant points which would support a conclusion that Parliament should in fact legislate”

particularly in respect of the HIA. It continued:

“(i) The Sewel Convention is a...convention, not a rule of law, and can be departed from for good reasons;

(ii) The constitutional obligation to avoid a vacuum in governance clearly has more weight in the present constitutional circumstances” where we do not have an Assembly.

The hon. Gentleman raised that second point. The third was that the HIAI made a clear case for intervention. Therefore, I put it to the Secretary of State that there is clear precedent and legal support for her intervening to support some of the most vulnerable and damaged people, either under the terms of the abuse inquiry or in respect of those who have been physically disabled.

I raise the pension for those who were disabled and injured because they are here today—some are in the Gallery for today's debate and some are meeting hon. Members from across the House. I think they would want to hear from the Secretary of State that she understands the nature of the issues they face.

Karen Bradley *rose—*

Owen Smith: Before the Secretary of State intervenes, let me quote her own words to her. She has said that the Government have responsibilities to

“provide better outcomes for victims and survivors—the people who suffered most during the troubles.”—[*Official Report*, 20 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 33.]

She has an opportunity to make good on those words and legislate, and I hope she is going to tell us right now that she will do so.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am at a loss to understand what the point being made has to do with the RHI or rates in Northern Ireland.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) is speaking to the Second Reading, and I am sure he is consistent and will ensure he sticks to that.

Owen Smith: I give way to the Secretary of State.

Karen Bradley: I want to clarify the difference between the two issues the hon. Gentleman is talking about. The HIAI—the Hart inquiry—was set up by the Executive and therefore, constitutionally, it is a matter for the members of the Executive to make a decision on its recommendations. The Hart inquiry reported to the Executive after they had collapsed and therefore they were unable to do that. That therefore gives a legal difficulty: what would the Executive have decided on those recommendations for this Parliament to try to second-guess?

On the victims of the troubles, the hon. Gentleman will know that I have made it clear that this Government are committed to setting up the institutions that were agreed under the Stormont House agreement. We are committed to consulting on how that is done, and as part of that, we will deal with all the issues regarding the victims of the troubles, because I agree with him that those people have been waiting far too long to see remedy for what they went through.

Owen Smith: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the intervention, and let me answer it and the point made by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley). She makes my point for me. She asks what the Executive decided in respect of the HIAI and the answer is we do not know. We know that they said they thought they ought to implement its findings in full—they said that just before the Assembly went down—so we have some clarity on that. Crucially, we do not know what the Executive would have decided in respect of the regional rate and we do not know whether the Assembly would have decided to change the terms of the cap on the RHI, yet we are legislating in this place, in this Bill, to change those things, without any knowledge of what the Assembly would have done. So it is precisely relevant to the business at hand—

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Owen Smith: I will give way in a moment. It is precisely relevant to the business at hand that we could be legislating under the same terms on these two issues

but are choosing not to do so for some reason, be it political expediency, timeliness or the fact there are less pressing financial reasons for doing so. Those people who are here today—there are people who were injured by either side in the troubles—having been in paralysis, having lost limbs or having lost livelihoods for a long, long time now, are in need of our support.

I know that the Secretary of State wishes to give that support, so I cannot understand, and do not think she has yet explained to the House, why it is not a moral imperative—and a financial imperative for those people—to introduce legislation to implement a pension for the severely injured and to enact at the very least the relatively minor compensation arrangements that Sir Anthony Hart agreed under the HIAI.

The Secretary of State has the extra £1 billion that she managed to find for the Democratic Unionist party under the confidence and supply agreement, and part of that money could be allocated either to the victims of historical institutional abuse or to those who have suffered injury as a result of the troubles. That would be time well spent in the House, and nobody would reject or resent it. I do not believe for a moment that it would undermine either the Secretary of State's efforts to get the peace process and the talks back on track, the Sewel convention or our desire to get the Assembly back up and running.

2.20 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I shall confine my remarks to the Bill.

Yesterday, we were doing here what should have been done in Stormont, and today, we are doing here what should have been done in Stormont. I have a sneaking suspicion that the Bill will not be the most exciting legislation passed in this Session, although I also suspect that politicians in Northern Ireland might regard the renewable heat incentive scheme as a little contentious here and there. The scheme has produced a lot of heat—a fair amount of it political heat—and I am sure it will not fade into nothingness just yet. It is almost tempting to submit an amendment to the tariff to get a bit of debate going and get some heat up—almost, but not quite.

As we are where we were yesterday, I shall be very brief. I reiterate what was said yesterday: these decisions should be taken at Stormont; decisions on devolved issues should be taken in a devolved legislature or by Ministers in the devolved Administrations, rather than here or in Whitehall; and Stormont politicians should get their collective act together and get back to work.

My comments on the rationale for the fast-tracking of this legislation should be taken as read as being the same as my comments on yesterday's legislation, although I again accept that there should be no further delay. We knew this was coming and the Bill should have been prepared and started in good time for it to be considered properly.

This Bill and the Northern Ireland Assembly Members (Pay) Bill, which we will consider later, will pass serenely by, while we all watch with benign smiles. That is really not how legislation should be passed. My contribution today is short because this is something that we have to do, rather than a matter for policy debate.

2.22 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am very sorry that the Bill has had to come before the House, but it is clearly necessary for the good governance of Northern Ireland for it to be passed. The Secretary of State was right to describe it as modest and discrete, which it clearly is, but I am concerned about incremental drift, which was why I was testing the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith). He sat down before I could intervene on him again, but the Opposition have certainly not said where their red line would be. He cited two examples, and there will be a lot of sympathy with his remarks—

Owen Smith: In case I did not, I meant to make it clear that I do not propose that we pursue other matters but absolutely do advocate that we legislate on historical institutional abuse and a pension for the injured.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because I think he has established his red line. I therefore assume that he would not wish to make decisions on, for example, the Commonwealth youth games, which has been cited by a Back Bencher from his own party. I am thinking that the Opposition red line on governance in Northern Ireland, in the absence of an Executive, exists somewhere between those options. That is extremely helpful and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

I, too, am interested in the metrics that have gone into making the recommendations in the Bill. It would be useful to know how the figures were arrived at. The House is de facto responsible for the scrutiny of these tax rises. Of course, imposing or levying taxes is a defining feature of any system of governance, and that is what we are doing today with the greatest of reluctance, notwithstanding the fact that we did with the same thing last year. We need to do everything we can to ensure that this does not become a habit.

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which I chair, is currently considering the future-proofing of the governance of Northern Ireland and how its governance can be made more robust. In our consideration of the Bill, it strikes me that we might like to think about how district rates and regional rates operate and whether some other body might be able to levy them both. Of course, that rather unusual and peculiarly Northern Ireland feature does not apply in the rest of the United Kingdom, where the council tax prevails. Has the Secretary of State given any thought to how taxes of that sort might be invested in local government? Given that local government in Northern Ireland has changed dramatically recently and the number of councils has been reduced, we might possibly be able to levy such taxes for particular purposes through local government, rather than the Assembly—that is, if Stormont is going to continue to be unstable, which is an eventuality that I regret we will have to allow for in our thinking.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that although it would be interesting to find a way to democratise the taxes, the regional rate is really used to finance central Government services, while the district rate is set by councils and used to finance local government? It might not be an accountable way to levy taxes if councils levy a rate for services that they do not deliver.

Dr Murrison: I note that we voted earlier to allow six hours to debate these matters, so I am more than happy to hold forth at great length. The right hon. Gentleman will have to await my Select Committee's report on this matter, which will deal partly with how, as an option for future-proofing governance in Northern Ireland, powers might be given to local government in future rather than to a body that I am afraid has shown itself to be unstable. It would clearly be inappropriate for any body to levy taxes for services for which that body was not responsible. That is the burden of the point that he was trying to make: the two clearly have to go together. I hope that my Select Committee report, which will be published in the next few weeks, will make that clear.

Although we have six hours to debate these matters, I am sure that we do not want to take that length of time.

Karen Bradley indicated dissent.

Dr Murrison: Well, if the Secretary of State wants me to go on, I certainly will, but I think I would rapidly lose the House's sympathy. I clearly support the Bill, which is completely uncontroversial, given the grave situation.

Lady Hermon rose—

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady will lengthen my speech, but of course I give way to her.

Lady Hermon: I am delighted to lengthen the speech of a distinguished chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and, indeed, former Minister in the Northern Ireland Office. In both those capacities, the hon. Gentleman will have built up expertise on and a considerable body of knowledge about inward investment into Northern Ireland. The second part of the Bill is on the renewable heat incentive scheme. Has the hon. Gentleman come to any conclusions about the negative impact on inward direct investment into Northern Ireland as a consequence of the continued uncertainty and bad publicity surrounding that scheme?

Dr Murrison: The straight answer to the hon. Lady's question is no, I have not formed a view on that. The absence of the institutions at Stormont is most definitely acting to reduce confidence in Northern Ireland as a place to invest. Indeed, the hon. Lady will recall our discussion of the electricity market earlier. All I can say—it has been repeated at length in this place and will continue to be—is that the solution is clear, and it is the restoration of the Executive and the Assembly.

Ian Paisley: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has said he is not aware of any negative impact. The facts speak for themselves: Invest Northern Ireland has had its highest year of inward investment ever and unemployment is at an all-time low. It appears that, no matter how many people in Northern Ireland froth themselves up into a lather about how negative everything is, Northern Ireland continues to go forward because of the drive and thrift of good, hard-working people there.

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman has made that point time and again, and he is right to do so. I think the question was to do with the RHI, and I suspect that it has had a fairly small impact on the picture that he paints, and rightly so. He makes a good point, and it is

[Dr Murrison]

worth emphasising, that we in this place have a duty, in the absence of an Executive and an Assembly that should be doing this, to big up Northern Ireland as a destination for FDI and for a place in which to grow jobs and prosperity. He is absolutely right to say that the picture has been transformed in recent years in Northern Ireland. I think it is true to say also that the restoration of the Executive would do wonders for that continuing picture. We must do everything in our power to ensure that that Executive is up and running without any further delay. I commend the Secretary of State for all her hard work in that respect. With that in mind, I shall end my remarks.

2.30 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Just as we said yesterday, this is a necessary measure that the Secretary of State has brought forward. It will not be the last of the necessary measures that she will have to bring to this House. I do not take the same view as the shadow Secretary of State, who seems to think that he can decide on the measures that should be brought to this place by whom he sees in the Public Gallery. There will be other issues that come across his desk in the future, to which, I am sure, he will give equal importance. For example, when it comes to school building in Northern Ireland, does he want to see Northern Ireland schoolchildren left without the new schools for which there is the capital money, but no Minister to make the decisions? I could go on and on, as I did yesterday, but I will not give lots of other examples.

The fact of the matter is that when there is an absence of an Assembly and an absence of Ministers to make decisions and when civil servants are not confident to make those decisions, there will be a number of issues that have to come back to this House. That is the issue that the Government will have to grasp.

Let me turn now to the rates order—I will try to stick to the two issues before us today. [Interruption.] I notice, actually, that the shadow Secretary of State had very little to say about the rates and the increase in rates. That is because the increase has been kept at a very modest level. In fact, if we look at the record of the Assembly, we will see that the previous Finance Minister could not even bring himself to name a rates increase last year, so the previous Secretary of State had to do it. Again, this year, this Secretary of State has had to do it as well.

There was a genuine fear in Northern Ireland that, given what the civil servants were recommending in the options papers and the record of past direct-rule Ministers, we would see draconian increases in local taxation. In fact, one of the papers suggested a 10% increase, which would have been devastating for small businesses and certainly for hard-pressed households. I am pleased that the Secretary of State, after discussion with the DUP and other parties, has come to the conclusion that businesses should have only an inflationary increase. That is good news for many businesses. She may have to bring in subsequent legislation to extend the small business rates relief scheme, which is due to run out this year. That reduces the overheads of tens of thousands of businesses across Northern Ireland.

The other aspect of that scheme, which I am pleased to say was a DUP proposal and has been copied in part in other places in the United Kingdom, is that it shows how innovative the Assembly—when it was working—was when it came to looking at how to help businesses. I am glad to see that that proposal will be continued. It certainly is a big relief for many small businesses, as their biggest overhead was the rates. Of course, domestic households are paying more in real terms than they would have been before this measure, but, as the Secretary of State has pointed out, it is still less than £1 per household per week.

I suspect that one reason why the shadow Secretary of State did not talk about the rates increases was that, of course, he is ashamed of the record of the Labour party when it comes to the council tax and the rates on people in local areas here in the United Kingdom. As the Prime Minister pointed out at Question Time, if a person lives in a Labour-controlled council, they are likely to pay £100 more in council tax than they would if they lived in a Conservative-controlled council. If a person lives in a DUP-controlled council, they will pay even less. That is a point worth noting. Perhaps the answer is that, instead of having a confidence and supply arrangement with the Conservatives, the DUP should be standing in local council areas in the rest of the United Kingdom to ensure that rate payers get good value for money. [Interruption.] That will have them shaking in their shoes. I am pleased that the protections have been kept in place.

Let me mention one other thing about the renewable heat incentive and the cap on the subsidies that will be available. Again, once it became obvious that there had been negligence in the way that the scheme was administered and that people were able to capitalise on the lack of controls, a DUP Minister stepped in to impose the cap, and I am glad to see that the Secretary of State has continued that cap in this legislation. May I just point out one thing? I am not trying to make excuses for the renewable heat incentive, but it was something that was started by an Administration here in Westminster. Devolved Administrations were encouraged to take it up, and the Northern Ireland Administration did so.

Much has been said about the lack of control, but it should be noted that the same lack of control still exists in GB. Let me give just one example. Under the previous Administration, Drax B power station, with coal mines just down the road, transferred to using wood pellets. Wood pellets, which devastate virgin forests in the US, are carried in ships across the Atlantic ocean and deposited and burned in a power station. The subsidy started at £250 million a year. This year, the subsidy will be more than £600 million a year. It is estimated that the subsidy could eventually rise to £1 billion a year.

Let me return to the Northern Ireland Administration. I am not trying to make excuses here, but the cost overrun and the lack of subsidy would have led to an expenditure of £450 million over 25 years. That was used as an excuse to bring down the Government in Northern Ireland. It was a shabby excuse made by a party that wanted to run away from its obligations to bring forward a budget, to make hard decisions about the past and to make difficult decisions about Brexit. It was used as an excuse, and the remedy, of course, was brought forward by a DUP Minister. I am glad to see that the Secretary of State has continued to implement

that remedy. It is the right thing to do: public money should not be abused in that way. If public money should not be abused in that way in Northern Ireland, equally, it should not be abused in that way in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is significant. The same attention has not been given to the lack of control in other parts of the United Kingdom from the same kind of scheme.

In conclusion, this is a necessary measure. We are pleased that it has been put through today. It gives certainty to finances in Northern Ireland. As the Secretary of State has said, about £1,000 million will be made available for public services as a result of the collection of the regional rates—whether domestic or business rates. That is important in delivering services in Northern Ireland, but as I pointed out yesterday, it is not sufficient simply to make the money available to Departments; there will be requirements in the future for Ministers to step in and give civil servants direction on how the money that we will collect as a result of this Bill should be spent.

2.39 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I will make a few points about the Bill and pose a couple of questions to the Secretary of State. The well-made points of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) will ring around Northern Ireland tonight, as questions certainly need to be answered.

Will the Secretary of State let us know what provision the Bill makes to consult the representative body of RHI owners? That is particularly important, as such a provision was previously included in the Northern Ireland arrangements. Although there have been court cases and all sorts of other activity, there has not yet been a meaningful consultation, and it would be useful if one were to take place. I encourage the Secretary of State to make provision for a consultation. It would be time well spent, and would help people who have put money into the scheme for all the right reasons, but now find themselves getting the rather shoddy end of the stick.

On the calculations that appear in the schedule to the Bill, will the Secretary of State let us know whether the Government intend to examine the payment caps as prices alter during the year ahead? I would be happy to write to the Secretary of State's ministerial team to ask them to examine the payments and accept that just putting them on a long finger is not the right answer. The payments have to be calculated in a way that gives at least some profit to the people who have invested in the scheme. Many of my colleagues and I are now receiving numerous calls from our constituents who invested in good faith, took up a Government offer and did not abuse that offer, but are now being turned over financially as a result of the scheme. That is not at all acceptable.

There are also issues to do with how the whole matter is reported publicly. Indeed, hon. Members have mentioned some public reports and the ongoing inquiry, and we look forward to seeing the inquiry's conclusions. However, it was publicly reported in our newspapers on 16 March—I was in the United States of America, so I did not have the opportunity to speak in the House on this matter—that Teri Clifton of Ofgem, who gave evidence to the inquiry, said that she recalled an interesting telephone call between myself and herself. The chairman of the inquiry, Sir Patrick

Coghlin, suggested to her that that was a very “intimidating” call. I take complete exception to that, not because of name-calling or accusations, but because of the facts.

The facts are that Teri Clifton alleged that I was part of a conference telephone call in November 2015 with a Mr and Mrs McNaughton, and representatives from Moy Park, Action Renewables and FG Plumbing and Heating. No such call took place. It is a lie to suggest that such a call took place. I was not involved in any conference call. Importantly, I understand—I have an email about this that I am happy to share with the Library so that it is on record for the House—that on 21 March 2016, my constituents, a company called Action Renewables and a company called FG Plumbing and Heating did make a call to Teri Clifton. I was not involved in that call and neither was the company, Moy Park. Whatever happened in that telephone conversation was frankly none of my business, as I was not involved in it.

This witness should be ashamed of herself for standing up and telling the press, or an inquiry, a calumny of the highest order—that a Member of Parliament was involved in a conference call when they were not. She should be brought back to the inquiry, put through the wringer and asked why she lied to an inquiry about such a matter. Importantly, the chairman of the inquiry, who put words in the mouth of a witness, should apologise to me personally for his conduct and his actions, as I do not take this at all well. I am happy to stand by and defend actions that I take, which is why I am an elected Member of this place, but I will not be lied about by Teri Clifton, the chairman of an inquiry, or newspapers in Northern Ireland. The chairman of the inquiry said the next day that we should not sensationalise matters, after he had gone out of his way to sensationalise matters about me. I take complete insult at his conduct and actions, and look forward to his apology.

2.45 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I shall speak briefly about this short and reasonably technical Bill. I will first touch on rates and the power being given to the Secretary of State to look at the issue. She has previously announced her intentions regarding these matters.

I emphasise in the strongest possible terms that I and my colleagues in the Democratic Unionist party firmly believe that the best place for these matters to be discussed and decided is in the Northern Ireland Assembly and by locally elected representatives there. Yesterday, I mentioned the important role that the Assembly's Committee for Finance plays in scrutinising such measures, talking to business and stakeholders, and trying to give advice. The Committees of the Northern Ireland Assembly have a statutory role to give advice and to form policy, which is unusual within an elected body. That important role aids the cross-party power sharing arrangement for Northern Ireland. It is incredibly disappointing that we do not have that in place, and it is sad that we do not have the opportunity to look at these measures in that way.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) mentioned the DUP's approach to taxes in Northern Ireland. As I said yesterday, a number of former Ministers of Finance in the Northern Ireland

[*Emma Little Pengelly*]

Assembly are now in this place. Regarding the year-on-year budget, the DUP made it clear that we are a party of low tax because we want to keep as much money as possible in the hands of hard-working and under-pressure households in Northern Ireland. We have looked at a range of measures to that end, including keeping rates low.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned some of the pressure regarding the increase in rates. I welcome the fact that the significant increases feared by some did not happen and that the Secretary of State consulted all the parties. I did not want any increase, because an increase will have an impact on those hard-working and under-pressure families, but I welcome the fact that, following consultation with the parties, it is not as significant as was initially suggested.

No firm details on rates were released to the Assembly by the last Minister of Finance, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, despite the Committee for Finance calling on him to do so. He did not bring forward the rates legislation in a timely way, which meant that the Secretary of State had to do so at a very late stage, on the collapse of the Assembly. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is not taking forward Máirtín Ó Muilleoir's proposal to lift the cap on domestic rates. I have been contacted about this issue by many of my constituents who were particularly worried about the significant increases that they would have faced as a result. Without the cap, they would have been paying more in domestic rates than if they had lived in a house in London worth £1 million or £2 million. That would have been fundamentally unfair. I disagreed with that proposal by Sinn Féin and I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has not taken it forward. It is important that there is fairness in relation to these matters across the United Kingdom.

We are of course aware that rates levels in Northern Ireland have traditionally been low. However, given what the Secretary of State has said about the devolved nature of these matters, as well as the very difficult position we find ourselves in and what has been said about the Sewel convention, I urge her to talk to local representatives and organisations in Northern Ireland to ensure that as we move forward through this difficult period, we continue to make sure that we keep costs low for our families in Northern Ireland.

The second aspect of the Bill deals with the renewable heat incentive. I welcome the Secretary of State continuing the cap on costs in relation to that scheme. We had considered this matter in the Northern Ireland Assembly. I welcome the fact that my Assembly colleague, the then Economy Minister, Simon Hamilton, brought forward these measures to almost eliminate any overspend on the scheme. I want to put on record, as we did previously, my concern about the reporting of this issue. Many of the political parties in Northern Ireland, for political reasons, gave a very clear impression to the public of Northern Ireland that £500 million was gone—spent—and that that was it. That was not the case. Despite the fact that we said repeatedly that it was not money that has been spent but money that was projected to be spent, and that we gave a firm commitment to bring forward measures to mitigate that, as we did under the DUP's ministership in the Department for the Economy—

Mr Gregory Campbell: Does my hon. Friend agree that just over year ago there was the most outrageous and disgraceful calumny in Northern Ireland as regards the reporting on the RHI scheme? A small number of journalists repeated the untruth that the money had been spent—had already gone up in smoke—and exacerbated people's fears unnecessarily, leading to the beginning of a state of crisis even before the Government fell?

Emma Little Pengelly: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I absolutely agree. Language was used to the effect that the money had turned to ash.

We have to be aware that many people do not get the detail of some of these schemes. They are not privy to the information that those who are delivering a scheme or have examined it may be privy to. The language used gave the clear impression to people—this was a misunderstanding—that the money had disappeared, but that was not the case. Yes, it is disappointing that there were flaws within the scheme. I welcome the fact that we moved, and moved quickly, to eliminate any overspend on the scheme—this measure will virtually eliminate that—and to protect public money. I welcome the Secretary of State's clarification about the projected cost saving of £450 million-plus over the lifetime of the scheme.

I welcome the fact that the regulations survived a legal challenge over the past year. That is an important point, because the situation caused concerns to be raised when we discussed it in the Northern Ireland Assembly. I welcome the fact that the courts looked at this and listened to the public interest. The Bill represents a continuance of those regulations. I urge the Secretary of State to consider implementing these mitigations on a more permanent basis, rather than their needing to be continued on a year-on-year basis. I understand that that was the intention prior to the collapse and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim indicated, that would have happened following consultation with all the relevant parties about putting measures on to a much firmer footing.

I was disappointed that the shadow Secretary of State did not eventually give way to me, despite indicating that he would do so. I was in fact rising to offer support for what he was saying. I think that my record shows that I might have come across as a little critical in some of my interventions on the hon. Gentleman, but I have always tried to be informative as opposed to critical. I was going to tell him that the WAVE campaigners on pensions for severely injured victims of the troubles are over here at the moment. Along with my DUP colleagues and our party leader, I had the opportunity to welcome them to the House of Commons last night to speak to them about this issue in some detail.

I have been supporting those individuals and encouraging them to speak to as many people as possible about this issue. I extend my thanks to those Members who have met or will meet them, including the Scottish National party shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). Such meetings are very valuable, because they have a very powerful story to tell. I was also going to say to the shadow Secretary of State that this issue extends far beyond Northern Ireland. It absolutely should be seen as an issue right across the United Kingdom, because there

were many victims over the course of the troubles from right across the United Kingdom, and a number of them were severely disabled. Although there is no doubt that some elements of dealing with victims' issues are devolved, this is a UK-wide issue.

The other issue I wanted to raise in support of the shadow Secretary of State relates to the fact that this is a legacy issue. As we have said, my party has been involved for many years in discussing how to deal with the very troubled and tragic legacy that arose from the troubles in Northern Ireland. In those discussions, there was an agreement across all parties that some of these issues happened at a time when there was direct rule and no devolved government. Some of the issues go much wider than Northern Ireland with regard to dealing with the legacy of the campaigns of violence. That would be recognised through the Government considering, drafting and bringing forward legislation to deal with a mixed range of issues, some of which would have been devolved and some that would not. I see no reason why such legislation could not contain provisions to support those who are very much in need of support through a victims' pension. The people who are over here are victims of some terrible, terrible atrocities, and they are suffering the consequences. I urge those Members who have not spoken to them to take the opportunity over the next couple of days to do so.

With reference to business in Northern Ireland, I welcome the very positive words about looking into the establishment of a business forum to discuss these matters, because the Secretary of State and the Minister will both know from listening to people from the business community that they have some concerns. They think it is right that their voices are heard. Of course, there is a positive story about business in Northern Ireland, as outlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim. Despite the political difficulties, business is doing well. Invest Northern Ireland is working hard. Businesses are benefiting through foreign direct investment. We want that to continue. We will be doing everything in our power, within our role, to work with our partners across Northern Ireland and across the House to try to ensure that Northern Ireland works and that we have the best possible outcomes for everybody across the community in Northern Ireland.

2.58 pm

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly). Members sometimes say that every time they rise to speak in the final part of a debate, everything they want to say has already been said. I have only been here for a short time, but it does not seem to me to make any difference. Plenty of people believe that repetition is definitely a way to get the message across, so I will continue to say what everyone else has said.

When the Northern Ireland Executive were in place, they had a rule associated with setting the regional rate that it was not to be above inflation, and that was what happened up until recently. Unfortunately, the previous Minister, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, did not have the bottle to bring forward a budget because he believed that he was probably going to have to bring about a rate increase—I am not sure whether that was the case, but I will state it. In line with that, many functions need to be carried on.

The regional rate makes up roughly 47% of the rates bill that a household pays. On the basis of what I have just said, a 4.5% increase—albeit above inflation—is a lot better than it could have been. I want to thank members of my party, as well as those of others, who have negotiated and been involved in that reduction and ensured we did not end up with a 10% increase in the rate. The people who will benefit greatly from that are those in households that are hard pressed at the moment.

I want to refer to the small business rate relief scheme brought forward by the Northern Ireland Executive to help our small businesses—primarily those on our high streets—which suffered greatly during the economic crisis. For a start, we set a limit of £5,000—if a business's rateable value was more than £5,000, it did not get the relief. If the rateable value was under £5,000, it did. We moved that to £10,000, and now it is £15,000. I would like to ensure that we bring forward the same scheme now and extend it for a further year, to help businesses that are already struggling and finding it difficult. I want to ensure that our high streets are vibrant and alive and that rates are not used as an excuse for having vacant properties on our high streets.

It is vital for services in Northern Ireland that we bring forward the Bill, but in doing so, we note with sadness that we do not have an Assembly in Northern Ireland to make such decisions for us. The people to blame for that are those who refuse to go there and set up a Government. They want to set red lines—we hear all sorts of red lines. None of those red lines will affect Northern Ireland economically, but their decision to not enter a Government has a major impact on Northern Ireland's economic development.

I do not want some people to think, "This is an opportunity because we have no Assembly," but in spite of all that, it is interesting to note our economic figures. We are doing extremely well with foreign direct investment, and our unemployment figure is one of the lowest since 1975. I welcome the statement of such figures, and I know that Northern Ireland as a region has benefited greatly from our connection with and being part of the Union. That is the important thing, and that is how we have developed our wealth as a country. We have not got it because of our connection to Europe, as some people might want to say. They might say that we have received a lot of economic benefit from Europe and that the grant funding will disappear, but that is only a small proportion of what we contribute to Europe as a nation, and as a consequence I believe we will still be able to sustain and support the communities and organisations that receive help through that mechanism.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I was under the impression that grant funding would stay the same, at least in the short term, so there would not be a big difference.

Paul Girvan: I welcome that point, and I understand that to be the case, but some people want to talk a crisis into absolutely everything. No matter what happens at the moment, they will make a crisis out of it. They want to say that there is nothing good going on, and they see nothing positive. Our media peddle a story that tells us nothing positive about what is going on in Northern Ireland. We are producing the best employment figures in Northern Ireland for decades, but what do we hear?

[Paul Girvan]

Nothing. They do not want to cover that. We hear all the nonsense, slander—I should not say that—and lines of attack that they put forward as their agenda.

The cap that has been put in place for the renewable heat incentive scheme has created some hardship for many who were using the scheme correctly and not abusing it. I believe that the cap had to be put in place, but there needs to be some recognition of how some people moved forward with funding under the scheme. They made a 25-year business plan, and some of them want a payback fairly quickly. Some of them were not fortunate enough to have enough money to put in and capitalise the whole thing themselves, so they had to go to finance houses to get a loan to buy equipment. They may have made a business plan based on a five-year payback, which means that it is quite a large payback per month for a small business, with some of them borrowing £300,000 or £400,000, but they did that on the basis of the Government-backed scheme and the funding that they were receiving.

I believe that there is an opportunity now, and that banks should be given help to renegotiate some of those finance deals. There will still be money to be made; but not as much. The difficulty is that businesses are sometimes paying far more than they are earning in a month—not just what they are receiving in payments from their energy use, but what the business itself is earning. A message has to go out that we will allow banks to renegotiate some of the terms of those loans.

I appreciate that the rates cap associated with property is set at £400,000. My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South and ratepayers in the leafy suburbs of her constituency will benefit greatly, not having to pay higher rates than someone who owns a property in the centre of London valued at £2.3 million. I welcome the retention of the cap within the rating scheme, and I support the Bill.

3.6 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) was the penultimate Back-Bench speaker in this debate, and I am the last. I am always pleased to contribute to debates about Northern Ireland—and, indeed, a few others as well.

First, I would like to thank the Secretary of State for bringing the Bill forward. As we outlined yesterday, this is not the preferred scenario for Northern Ireland. We very much want to see the Bill coming forward, but it is no doubt due to Sinn Féin's obstinate attitude, the obstacles it has put up and its austerity agenda, which we are all going to suffer from. Today will hopefully be the first stage in people not suffering, because the people back home will have an opportunity to see what we can do.

The preferred scenario is that we allow those who were elected to do a job to sit down and do that job. My colleagues are desperately aware of that and are itching to do it, yet we are past the stage where we can apply a plaster to cover the wound. The wound is infected and seeping and needs urgent attention, and today's debate is the prep for the surgery. The Secretary of State has set that out. I would like to thank all hon. Members who have contributed so far to bringing the Bill forward.

We have discussed who and what caused the wound—a militant Sinn Féin agenda—and now we are beginning the process of cauterising it and stopping the bleeding.

I want to put on record my thanks to my colleague, the MLA and former Finance Minister Simon Hamilton, for all the hard work he has done. He is a really hard-working MLA, as all MLAs are. They do incredible work across all constituencies in Northern Ireland, night and day.

The people from the Province have waited long enough for decisions, and today we are waiting for the right decision to be made. For example, I know that the council that covers the majority of my constituency, Ards and North Down Borough Council, has been working really hard to keep the rates down in its area, as has Newry, Mourne and Down District Council. Ards and North Down Borough Council has initiated a scheme whereby the grey bin for any waste is collected every other week, a blue bin for recyclables is collected on the alternate week and a brown bin for food waste is collected every other week, along with a kerbside collection of glass.

Such initiatives enable savings to be made at the council level. Some of the savings were put into an educational pot that is used to promote environmental issues in schools, by taking children to see how recycling works and holding other such events. The pot is used to go around community groups and host events in communities, and a large amount of it goes to offsetting the rate, meaning that despite the council building a state-of-the-art leisure centre and many other outputs in Ards, when it met on Tuesday 13 February and struck a district rate for 2018-19, the domestic rate was 22.3273p in the pound—a rise of 2.96%. It is a thrifty council, using all its Ulster Scotsism to look after the pennies and the pounds and ensure that it can still deliver a good rate. For the average household in Ards and North Down, that equates to an increase a £1.35 per month, and they get all the things I have mentioned and a lot more for that money. The council has attempted to stay as close to the inflation rate as it possibly could, while still providing an acceptable level of service provision.

When we look at the decision that the Secretary of State is making today, we understand the reasons why she has put it forward and why it must be done. I know that the Secretary of State will say that we pushed and pushed her to take the decision, and we are very pleased that she has done so.

For the record, may I commend the Secretary of State for her answers during Northern Ireland questions today? She was pithy and confident, and she showed all the things we look for in a Secretary of State. There again, the Under-Secretary obviously did extremely well, too, in assisting the Secretary of State. He always does well.

Some will question why, when others are attempting to keep increases as near to the inflation level as possible, the Secretary of State has set the rate at the level she has. We need more finance, and this will enable such money to be collected, allowing business to continue and the wheels to carry on turning. This is all part of the additional money that has been granted by this House.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that councils in Northern Ireland are very

prudent, because we have working relationships and collaboration right across the whole Province, which helps to save money for the general public?

Jim Shannon: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. There may be an odd council or two that are not quite as prudent as they should be, and we would like them all to be every bit as prudent as one another.

With the additional money, we live in hope that the Ballynahinch bypass might even be started, that nurses could be trained in using diabetic insulin pumps and that there may be more hours for NHS staff and more classroom assistance. We hope for all these things from this money, and we will see how it goes.

I am very pleased that the Government have awarded NHS staff a wage increase today. This House should be proud of that, use it to encourage them and say that it is a recognition of their efforts and hard work.

As we all know, the nature of rates is that they go up every year; it is very unlikely that they will not. The fact is that they are higher this year than they were last year and the year before. I want to point out, however, that families are struggling. It would be remiss of me to come to the Chamber without making that point. I obviously say that regularly, and I have done it again today.

It is my belief that the working poor are becoming more and more prevalent, with parents in work and yet struggling under the burden of bills. Another sacrifice for a struggling family who are not on benefits is that they do not get any form of rates relief, yet their children might be living in poverty. In Northern Ireland, we have some of the highest child poverty levels in the whole United Kingdom. An area may be perceived to be affluent, but that does not mean that the issues of child poverty are not real, because they clearly are.

Lady Hermon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Shannon: If the hon. Lady wants to make a contribution, I encourage her to make a speech, because that would be very helpful.

In 2016, it was found that 24% of children in Northern Ireland live in poverty. We need to address that issue and ensure that raising the rates will help those in poverty as well as others. For those who are well off enough to live in a large house with no thought of a rates increase, such an increase is wonderful, and it is fine for those who are receiving housing benefit and help with rates, but for those who are just above the income threshold for help, it is another blow. I again ask the Secretary of State whether it is possible to respond to the needs of households that fall below that threshold. They would not have been affected a while ago, but will find that they are with this rates increase.

I wish to comment on the fact that, as people know, the Northern Ireland Assembly has not functioned correctly or been able to make legal decisions for the past 14 months. As we are aware from our discussions yesterday, this period has seen some of the largest growth, the highest percentage rises in job opportunities and the lowest unemployment that we have had for a great many years. The Assembly set the scene for that, putting concrete foundations in place for it, and we are now seeing the benefits. Again, as I am sure others

would agree, we would love to see even more of that, as we would if we had a functioning Assembly that was able to work.

I thank the Secretary of State for setting the rate, but is there a way to lower it for households on the threshold of help, and indeed for those that receive no help? They now have yet another higher bill to pay, and that bill is not taken into account in working out what comes to the household in the form of tax credits or other support. Again, we knew that the rate increase had to come, but we cannot ignore what may happen. Will the Minister outline what help in relation to the rates increase is available for those who are being squeezed financially?

It would be remiss of me not to comment on the continuation of the small business rate relief scheme, for which I am thankful, as we are seeking to revive our high streets and provide support to small retailers and small employers. In the main town of Newtownards in my constituency, and indeed in Comber and Ballynahinch as well, small business rate relief has brought dividends and positivity. Where once there were vacant shops in the high street of Newtownards, there are none today.

It is well known—I will say it again to make sure that it is recorded—that Newtownards is one of the towns with one of the best shopping and town centres in the whole of Northern Ireland. It is not only me saying so, but those who live there and businesses as well. If hon. Members have not been to Newtownards for their shopping, I encourage them to do so. I know that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), has done so, and I encourage others to do likewise. We also look forward to having the opportunity to take the Minister to Newtownards shortly as well.

In the same way that Ards and North Down Borough Council found an innovative way to educate the community, and in turn to save it, by keeping the rates down, what innovations can be made to ensure that the rate is not continually uplifted well above inflation and to help people who, through no fault of their own, find themselves in a financial squeeze? We need infrastructure and an influx of funding for the NHS, but we also need to ensure that those who are in the middle and working hard—they see their children having massive debt in student loans, but are unable to help them—are not squeezed any further. I again thank the Secretary of State for the Bill.

3.17 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have used expediency as their watchword this afternoon. Would that brevity was always the order of the day here.

The Secretary of State rightly referred to “a necessary intervention”, and the points that she and the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), made about the current situation being unsought by any of us and something that we have to manage were very well made.

I want to concentrate on one aspect of the Secretary of State’s contribution, which was her very welcome mention of small business rates. This was picked up by the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan). Some of us have had the great pleasure of attending small business Saturday throughout Northern Ireland. It has taken me from Downpatrick to Coleraine, but I

[Stephen Pound]

have to say that the high point was probably visiting Quails in Banbridge. People have said that Quails is the Fortnum & Mason of County Down, but I think that Fortnum & Mason is the Quails of Knightsbridge.

Nigel Dodds: The hon. Gentleman mentions Quails, which I know very well since it is not far from where I live, but just for the sake of completeness and inclusiveness, he should also mention Fred Elliott, an excellent purveyor of meat products in Banbridge.

Stephen Pound: There are strict rules in this House against the wearing of advertising. I appreciate that the top of my head is available, but I would prefer it not to be emblazoned with anybody's name. I am more than happy to give credit to Fred Elliott, although I have to say that Quails is quite remarkable.

We have heard a range of speakers coming mostly around the same point, although they occasionally went off in slightly different directions. None was more recondite and esoteric than that of the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), who raised the terrifying prospect of the DUP standing in my constituency and those of other Members. That is something that I am prepared to wrestle with, although I have visited the right hon. Gentleman in Carrick and Larne and, the last time I visited Carrickfergus Council, a tank was parked outside the city hall. He apparently uses it for canvassing, so I would prefer him not to proceed.

Bob Stewart *rose*—

Stephen Pound: I will be happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I should say in advance that I am unable to identify the precise type of tank.

Bob Stewart: I just want to point out to my hon. Friend—because he is a friend—that Carrickfergus was the first battle honour of the Cheshire Regiment, in 1689.

Stephen Pound: I cannot begin to match the Cheshires when it comes to battle honours, as most of my fighting took place in Union Street in Plymouth, sadly—but that is another story, and not one that we will necessarily hear today.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) summed up. When he rises to his feet, additional *Hansard* reporters are drafted in—two of them have been carried out with wet towels around their heads. I am quite sure that the hon. Gentleman's contribution was excellent; every 50th word certainly resonated with the House. If the *Hansard* reporters were paid on a piecework basis, they would all retire by the end of the week.

The hon. Gentleman always makes important points, and he rightly referred to my very pleasant visit to Newtownards, where I was the guest at an extremely enjoyable dinner held in the Elim Pentecostal church on the Ards peninsula. There was not an enormous amount of liquid hospitality, to be fair, but the welcome was extremely warm and the company extremely stimulating.

Something is hanging over all that we have discussed today. The reality is that we are talking about being in a place where we do not necessarily want to be. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock)

talked about this being a serene and benign process. She was right to make that point, but we should also be aware of the alternative. If there is serenity and benignity, it is in this place, not necessarily in others.

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) made powerful points, which I hope will be answered soon—they have to be. We then heard from the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly). That was an intensely powerful, really important speech—and not only in setting out the Democratic Unionist party's fiscal policy, which appears to echo Gladstone's famous dictum that money should fructify in the pockets of the people rather than be taken in taxation. She then referred to today's visit from the people from WAVE Trauma Centre, whom the shadow Secretary of State was delighted to welcome.

When we hear the stories of those people—people who have lost their legs or been paralysed; in one case, a man's father died of a heart attack when his son was shot—we realise what the alternative is in Northern Ireland and why it is absolutely crucial that we should never, ever cease bending every single sinew to ensure the continuity of the peace process. I would like to thank Sandra Peake and Alan McBride from the WAVE centre and pay tribute to those who have come across today: Mark Kelly, Jennifer McNern, Paddy Cassidy, Robert Barfoot, Dr Mary Hannon Fletcher, Peter Heathwood, Cathy McCann, Alex Bunting and Paul Gallagher. They have suffered in a way that most of us in this House can never begin to imagine.

If we do not do every single thing we can to ensure the continuity of the peace process and stability in Northern Ireland, we insult those people and their families. We do not give them credit for their suffering. We simply have to do our very best. Everyone today has spoken from that standpoint. This is one occasion on which I hope we are as one in the House. There have been differences of emphasis by all means, but let us never, ever forget that, if we cannot manage this process in the right way, plenty wish to do it in the wrong way.

We on the Opposition Front Bench are as one with the Secretary of State and her Minister. We support them in what they are doing, but above all we recognise the suffering that many have experienced—the almost unimaginable pain and trauma that they have known. We will never, ever let you down.

3.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Shailesh Vara): It is a great pleasure to follow the moving words of the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound). I thank all those who have contributed today from across the political divide. It is particularly good that we all broadly agree about the way forward for this Bill. In bringing it forward, alongside the Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill, which the House considered yesterday, we will be providing support for public services and finances in Northern Ireland.

The Bills deal solely with matters that are rightly the responsibility of the Executive and the Assembly and I very much hope that they will be dealt with at a devolved level and in a devolved Assembly in future, as that remains our overriding priority—one shared, I know, by Members across the House. In the absence, however,

of an Executive and sitting Assembly, it falls to the UK Government to bring forward necessary measures, such as those in the Bill.

Setting the regional rates will give certainty to citizens and businesses over the level and frequency of their bills and to the Northern Ireland Departments that rely on the revenue from those rates. The extension of the cost-capping regulations for the Northern Ireland renewable heat incentive scheme will protect the public purse in a way that fairly upholds the interests of those receiving payments under the scheme. It is important that we take action now to address those issues.

I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), who opened on behalf of the Opposition. I felt that some of the points he raised were dealt with by the Secretary of State. I am also grateful for the comments of the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). The comments made by the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) were very much appreciated, as were those made by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley).

I thank the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) for her moving and passionate speech, which certainly had the attention of all the House—I do not mean that the House was not listening to everyone else, but it listened more attentively to the hon. Lady. I also thank the hon. Members for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The Secretary of State and I are both particularly grateful for the kind comments that the hon. Member for Strangford extended in our direction.

I will try to cover some of the questions raised, but I am mindful that brevity is the order of the day and of this particular debate. The measures being taken are necessary and proportionate to safeguard public finances and public services in Northern Ireland. The decision to raise the rate was not taken lightly. The Secretary of State took account of the budgetary scenarios outlined by the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland and spoke to the parties and to stakeholders. It was clear that, to enable Northern Ireland to live within its means while safeguarding growth and addressing pressures in key areas such as health and education, the right course was to ask households to pay slightly more—in this case, less than £1 per week per household. The levels outlined in the Secretary of State's statement on 8 March strike that balance and offer a necessary, fair and reasonable position on regional rates.

In the absence of an Executive and sitting Assembly, the measures in the Bill will help to safeguard public finances and services in Northern Ireland. I propose that the Bill be read a Second time.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Bill considered in Committee (Order, this day).

[SIR LINDSAY HOYLE *in the Chair*]

Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule agreed to.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY MEMBERS (PAY) BILL (BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland Assembly Members (Pay) Bill:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Notices of amendments, new Clauses or new Schedules to be moved in Committee of the whole House may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.

(c) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(d) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) If, following proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration of the Bill, a legislative grand committee withholds consent to the Bill or any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill, the House shall proceed to Reconsideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(5) If, following Reconsideration of the Bill—

(a) a legislative grand committee withholds consent to any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill (but does not withhold consent to the whole Bill), and

(b) a Minister of the Crown indicates his or her intention to move a minor or technical amendment to the Bill, the House shall proceed to consequential Consideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply—

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (17)(a) of this Order.

(8) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

Subsequent stages

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

Reasons Committee

Miscellaneous

(17) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(18) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(19) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.—(*Paul Maynard.*)

Northern Ireland Assembly Members (Pay) Bill

Second Reading

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This is the third important piece of legislation to be brought before the House this week. The Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill, which the House debated yesterday, and the Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) Bill, on which we have just concluded proceedings, focused on increasing clarity and confidence in Northern Ireland's finances. This Bill will now look to increase public confidence in Northern Ireland's political institutions.

The Bill addresses an issue of long-standing public concern: the pay and allowances of Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly. That is a subject in which interest among the public has increased with the time that Northern Ireland has been without a functioning devolved Executive—a period that now stands at 14 months.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that our party supports the Bill. We believe that it is right to take the power to deal with MLA pay and to stop the proposed pay rise as agreed by the parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly. We would also ask the Government to look carefully at the situation in which Sinn Féin representatives get representative money in this place without being subject to the same rules as everybody else. The two should go together.

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman has raised that point with me on several occasions and it has been discussed in the House. I know the strength of feeling on the matter, but he will also know that it is a matter for the House, not for the Government. That is why we are dealing with the power to vary the pay and allowances of Members of the Legislative Assembly today.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State is right to indicate that the matter is for the House, not for the Government, but what is a matter for the Government is the ability of Northern Ireland political parties to raise funds outside the United Kingdom in international jurisdictions and wherever they so choose. She could take steps to close that loophole. Will she do so?

Karen Bradley: At Question Time, we had a question about the transparency of donations and I am pleased that the House has passed the order to start to increase such transparency. I know that the hon. Gentleman is keen to see further work on that, but I ask that we should see how the order works first. If more needs to be done, we will need to look at that.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I am surprised but delighted when, during election campaigns, I continue to receive a salary, notwithstanding the fact that the House has been dissolved. What is the difference in principle between us receiving salaries when Parliament

has been dissolved and Members of the Assembly receiving salaries when there is no Assembly? I do not mean to be difficult, but I would not want us to set an unhelpful and unwelcome precedent.

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend always asks helpful questions; he is not known for doing anything other. We are looking to have the power in this House to vary the salaries of Members who serve in the Northern Ireland Assembly—MLAs—in response to the fact that there has been no functioning Assembly for 14 months and the clear public concern about people receiving salaries when the Assembly is not sitting. He is correct, of course, that Members of Parliament receive a salary for the period in which an election runs, but I believe that the rules are different for the period when Parliament is dissolved as opposed to when it is sitting. I understand his concerns, but I assure him that this relates specifically to MLAs' pay, not MPs' pay.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I encourage my right hon. Friend not to be distracted because a number of important points have been made by right hon. and hon. Members, but the Bill is very tight and, as she rightly says, responds to public concern. In my experience, and I suspect in hers too, that public concern goes right across the divide in Northern Ireland. She is right to pursue this matter, because the public expect these salaries to be dealt with. In my understanding, that is the sole purpose of the Bill. Everything else can be discussed electively, but it must not distract the Secretary of State.

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, for his intervention. He is right that the Bill responds public concern, which has been raised with me and with him as Chair of the Committee, and with its members. I am sure that it has also been raised with Members of Parliament here who represent constituencies in Northern Ireland.

The Bill will grant the power to vary pay and allowances for Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and, as I have just said, it is clear from my conversations with the public and stakeholders that there is broad desire for action to be taken in this regard. The Assembly has not sat since 13 March 2017—its first meeting after the 2 March election—but its Members continue to be paid their full salaries.

MLAs' salaries and allowances are rightly a devolved matter. The normal process for setting MLA pay and allowances is for the Independent Financial Review Panel—a body set up by the Assembly for this purpose—to make determinations on pay and allowances. The panel would normally do that ahead of each Assembly election to cover the newly elected Assembly, although it is also empowered to make changes to reflect extraordinary circumstances. The last panel determination was made in March 2016 before the election in May that year. As no Members have been appointed since the first panel's term of office ended in 2016, there is at present nobody in Northern Ireland with the power to change MLA pay to reflect the current extraordinary circumstances.

From my conversations and from opinion polling, it is clear that the public want to see somebody with the power to act. That is what the Bill will leave me in a position to do. In short, it will put me in the same

[Karen Bradley]

position as the panel ordinarily would be in, giving me, as Secretary of State, the power to set out the pay and allowances of MLAs by means of a determination.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): When the Secretary of State last made a statement to the House covering this particular issue, she made it clear that she wanted the Northern Ireland parties to make “full and final representations” to her on it, but she did not clarify when the closure date was for full and final representations. Will she confirm today that that date is before the end of this month and that she will therefore be free to cut MLAs’ salaries before the end of March?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady is right that I did not set a specific date. I hope that representations will be made and will continue to be made and that the fact that we have this Bill before us will encourage people to come forward and make representations. I am also clear that the reason for introducing it this week—I will come to this later—is to ensure that the pay rise that would have gone through automatically on 1 April is stopped, and that we can then take a decision about pay. I will come to my position—what I am minded to do—but she is right that I have not made a final decision on a date.

Lady Hermon: I thank the Secretary of State for being so generous in taking a second intervention so quickly. Will she also confirm in the House, for the record, that all representations made from Northern Ireland political parties will be published, so that the public can see that the general consensus across the political parties is that they want to see MLAs’ salaries cut?

Karen Bradley: Of course I am happy to publish any representations made to me, although that might not be appropriate for some, for specific reasons, and information might need to be redacted. I cannot envisage any such reasons now, however, and I will of course ensure as much publicity and transparency as possible.

One important difference between the panel’s powers and those in the Bill is that, although the panel also makes determinations on pensions, the Bill includes an explicit protection for MLAs’ pensions so that they are not affected by any changes to MLAs’ pay.

With the panel’s 2016 determination continuing to operate, and without action by someone empowered to make a new determination, a £500 per year increase in the salaries of all MLAs will automatically apply from 1 April. That is linked to the level of inflation the previous September. The criteria for an increase was met in 2017, so the increase will apply automatically at the start of next month. I am clear that it is not appropriate for this increase to apply in the present circumstances.

In advice provided to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), Trevor Reaney, a former Clerk of the Northern Ireland Assembly, recommended that the increase not take place. Further, the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly has written to me on behalf of the Assembly Commission saying that it is its view that the rise would not be appropriate and that it would be

appropriate for me to take action to stop it. If granted the power to do so by the Bill, I will introduce a short determination to do just that.

More broadly, in his December 2017 advice, Mr Reaney provided his independent assessment of what action should be taken on MLA pay and allowances in the current circumstances. As part of that advice, he also recommended stopping the £500 increase. The advice was, however, more wide ranging. He made a series of recommendations, including for a 27.5% reduction in MLAs’ salaries. That was a considered case based on his assessment, following discussions with the parties and other stakeholders, and reflected pay that took account of all the important work that many Members continued to do in the absence of an Assembly. That is, at this stage, a recommendation I am minded to follow.

As we have just discussed, I set it out last week that I wished to seek final representations from the parties before I took action. I continue to encourage those representations so that we can hear views from all sides before introducing a determination on wider changes to pay and allowances under the Bill. I cannot act to put a determination in place, however, until the Bill has been passed by both Houses and received Royal Assent. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members across the House and in the other place will support the Bill and allow me to take action on this matter.

The Bill itself makes no change to MLAs’ pay or allowances. It merely grants me the power to make a determination during this period without an Executive.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does the Secretary of State have a view on what should happen to the salaries of those who work for MLAs? They have no choice, and we should be sympathetic to that.

Karen Bradley: I have said in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and elsewhere that I agree with the point my hon. and gallant Friend makes. The staff, who work extraordinarily hard on behalf of MLAs’ constituents, should not suffer as a result of our being unable to form an Executive and get the Assembly sitting. As Members of this Parliament, we know the work we do in this place and for our constituents outside, but we also know how hard our staff work, and they should not be prejudiced by the Bill. I do not intend, therefore, to take any action with regard to staff salaries. They should continue to be paid, given how incredibly hard they work for MLAs’ constituents.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State take it from me that many people in Northern Ireland will be grateful she is doing that? As we heard in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee whenever the former Finance Minister, Alex Easton, came and answered questions from the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon)—it became known as the Alex Easton section—the staff of hard-working MLAs work day and night to deliver the best deal possible for constituents, so this is very good news. We welcome the salary reduction, but people on the ground should not suffer as a result.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab) *rose*—

Karen Bradley: I give way to the shadow Secretary of State.

Owen Smith: I too, welcome what I think I heard from the Secretary of State, but may I clarify one point? Is she saying that she does not intend to enact Trevor Reaney's recommendation that the staff budget should be cut from £50,000 to £37,500? If that is what she has decided, it is an excellent decision.

Karen Bradley: That is exactly what I am saying. As I have said, I know how hard my staff work, and I am sure that the staff of all of us in this place work incredibly hard for our constituents. The position of the staff at Stormont should not be prejudiced by what is happening with their political masters.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I have great sympathy with what the Secretary of State has said about not cutting allowances for staff. They should not be punished because the MLAs are not sitting and have not sat for 14 months. However, the Secretary of State said that she was "minded" to follow Trevor Reaney's recommendation, delivered on 20 December 2017. Does that translate into cutting MLAs' salaries when she is given the power to do so today? That is what the people of Northern Ireland want to know.

Karen Bradley: Yes, I am minded to cut the salaries of MLAs in line with the Trevor Reaney recommendation, on the basis that that is the only evidence that I have and the only advice that I have. However, I am open to recommendations and representations from others. I want to put on record my thanks to Mr Reaney for the work that he did, but if others believe that something different should be done, I shall welcome their representations.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the Bill. In the statement that was made last week, it was indicated that there would be consultation with the parties. I welcome that as well, but when will the consultation start?

Karen Bradley: I do not intend to consult the parties explicitly. What I have said is that I would welcome representations from the parties to provide me with the evidence and the views that I need to make a final decision about the level at which we should set MLAs' salaries.

I have spent many hours in the Stormont Parliament building over the last few weeks, along with some Opposition Members. It is a wonderful building, and it is right for it to be full of MLAs and their staff, working and delivering on behalf of the people who elected them. We know how different this place is during recesses from how it is when Parliament is sitting. I want to see that place alive, as it should be.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I absolutely agree with what the Secretary of State has said about constituency staff. They work incredibly hard, and they are in their present position through no fault of their own, so I welcome that decision. I ask her to recognise, however, that there are also very hard-working constituency MLAs, many of whom—including those in my party—want to get back to work but cannot because there are red lines. One of them is my constituency colleague Mr Christopher Stalford, who works very hard in South Belfast alongside me.

Karen Bradley: Those are issues that Mr Reaney looked at. He looked at the work that the MLAs are not doing because the Assembly is not sitting, but also at the work they do for their constituents, and tried to find a balance. That is why I would welcome representations from others, so that I can be sure that the decision that is made is a fair decision that reflects properly the contribution that MLAs make to their constituents even in the absence of an Assembly.

Once an Executive is formed, the power to make a determination will return to being an entirely devolved matter. A future panel would of course be free to make a new determination, applying to all future periods, if it saw fit. That would supersede any determination made under the Bill. To ensure that we do not again find ourselves in a situation in which MLAs remain on full pay when there is no Executive, with no panel determination covering that situation, the Bill allows a determination made under it to apply again. Let me make it clear that it is the determination that would apply again. The power to make a new determination would, in those circumstances, remain devolved.

Therefore, overall, the focus of the Bill is narrow, and I consider taking the power to set MLA pay a necessary step to uphold public confidence in Northern Ireland in the absence of an Executive and a sitting Assembly. As an immediate step, if granted the power set out in the Bill, I intend to act to stop the £500 per year inflationary increase applying to MLAs' salaries from 1 April. Beyond that, I am minded at this stage to follow the recommendations made by Mr Trevor Reaney, but am open to receiving representations before making my final decision. I commend the Bill to the House.

3.50 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): We accept the need for a cut in MLAs' salaries. The last Labour Government did that on three occasions when there was a similar period of the Assembly not sitting; in the first instance, we cut it from £43,000 to £29,000; in the second instance, we cut it to £21,000; and there was a third cut in 2006. I therefore have one note of caution for those who imagine this will prompt the Assembly and its parties to instantly come together: pay was cut three times and it did not necessarily work—I am not sure that it was the third cut that pushed the parties over the edge to do the deal. None the less, there is widespread support for this measure in the House and in Northern Ireland.

We recognise that, as Trevor Reaney said, legislative work is not the only aspect of MLAs' work. Just as for MPs, there is a huge amount of work for them to do in their constituencies and elsewhere. Mr Reaney estimates between 50% and 60% of MLAs' work is constituency-based, not legislative. However, clearly they are not doing their job in its entirety and therefore it is entirely justifiable that their salaries are cut.

We support the way in which the Secretary of State intends to do this, if she follows Trevor Reaney's proposed mechanism of a phased step basis. That makes sense given that people have to make adjustments: MLAs have mortgages and families, and it is entirely fair, and compatible with employment legislation, that a measured step-wise approach is taken. I welcome the news that the Secretary of State will not enact Mr Reaney's recommendation in respect of MLAs' staff, however. As many Members have already remarked, they continue

[Owen Smith]

to work extremely hard and the fact that the Assembly is not sitting is no fault of theirs. Therefore, it is right that the budget is maintained.

Finally, I have a question. I am not sure whether I am misreading the Bill or whether I have read this in the notes somewhere and now cannot find it, but I understood that we were going to address in the Bill the anomaly whereby Members of the Assembly who cease to be Members of the Assembly yet are members of the Assembly Commission continue to be paid. That has been a concern and a cause of great consternation and surprise in Northern Ireland. Is that being dealt with in this Bill, and if not, will it be dealt with at some point?

3.52 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): This is a bit like déjà vu all over again.

We, too, accept the Secretary of State's points with regard to the need for this Bill. I have little to add to my comments in the last two debates, particularly on my dismay at the fast-tracking of today's legislation and my view that these decisions should properly be taken in the devolved legislature. I am, however, very pleased to note the Secretary of State's points regarding MLAs' allowances and staff costs not being cut. At least, constituents will therefore continue to be well-served from constituency offices. I certainly acknowledge the strength of feeling of the public of Northern Ireland on this issue, so we will not oppose the Bill.

3.53 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am delighted to see how much time there is for me to go through this Bill's provisions, but I think you will appreciate, Mr Deputy Speaker, that we are in danger of permitting my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) an inordinate amount of time for his Adjournment debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I just say that most Members of Parliament will now want to intervene on the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson)?

Gavin Robinson: That is exactly what I was going to say, because I fear there will be nobody in this Chamber to intervene at all, and therefore God bless "PARLY" tweets, because that will be empty—devoid of anything to say—this evening.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Perhaps the Deputy Speaker could give us some guidance on whether my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford will be allowed to intervene on himself during the Adjournment debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that, if there is nobody else here, he definitely will.

Gavin Robinson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Last night, you were concerned that we were descending into talk of bunkers; today we are perhaps going bonkers. But we will get there.

My parliamentary leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), has outlined our support for the Bill. We think that this is a necessary step that the public of Northern Ireland expect us to

take. Indeed, there has been a great deal of frustration over the length of time it has taken to get to this point. The only greater level of frustration is that we do not have an Assembly and that all 90 Members of our legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland will be affected as a consequence of the actions of a minority within it. We cannot overlook that fact when we address the contents of the Bill.

Other Members will mention hard-working MLAs. Mention has been made of one from North Down and of another from Belfast South. My colleagues Joanne Bunting and Robin Newton are also hard-working Members of the Legislative Assembly. I would go further, however, and say that all five representatives in my constituency of Belfast East are hard-working representatives for their constituents—not just the Democratic Unionists but the Alliance party representatives and an Ulster Unionist as well. The same is true of Green representatives and of Social Democratic and Labour party representatives in Northern Ireland. All those representatives would have a Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly established and working again tomorrow. They all stood because they believe in their constituents, in our country and in democracy, yet they are frustrated from doing their jobs. There might be a tad of frustration at the length of time it has taken to see action on MLAs' pay, but MLAs and the public more generally want the MLAs to be active for their constituents and for their communities. Those MLAs want to get on with the job.

We are where we are, however, and there are a couple of questions about the Bill that I would like to raise with the Secretary of State. It has been clearly outlined that, should it be required, any determination on the basis of this legislation would be capable of being made again, even after the restoration and potential subsequent decline of an Executive.

Karen Bradley: If it is helpful, I can tell the hon. Gentleman the way this will work. Once the Executive are formed, the power to make decisions will move back to the panel, because it can be re-formed, but if the Executive were to collapse again, we in this House would retain the ability to make a determination here without the need for further legislation.

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful to the Secretary of State, but clause 1(3) gives me cause for concern. It states clearly:

"The power to make a determination under subsection (1) or (2) ceases on the first occasion"

that the Bill is used to make a determination and an Executive are re-formed. If that power ceases when an Executive are re-formed, how can another determination be made? I have read the explanatory notes, and I see that the intention is that a determination can be made, but that seems to jar with the fact that the power will cease on the first occasion it is used when an Executive are re-formed. I understand that this question might not be able to be answered quickly, but if there is an intervention to be made, I will take it. If not, I will move on, but I hope that we can get some clarification on this as we continue our consideration of the Bill.

The Secretary of State is absolutely right to indicate that she will immediately take steps under this legislation, if it is passed, to stop the £500 increase that is due to

MLAs' pay in April. That is a sensible decision, and I think that the court of public opinion would be aghast if Assembly Members were to receive another £500 increase.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. The first determination does cease at the point that the Executive are re-formed, but we still have the power to make further determinations in this place if the Executive subsequently collapse. This determination will cease, so we may then need to make a separate determination.

Gavin Robinson: I thank the Secretary of State. That is exactly what was outlined earlier, but it still does not solve the problem of the terminology and the language. Clause 1(3) states that the

“power to make a determination”—

a fresh or new determination—

“under subsection (1) or (2) ceases on the first occasion after the passing of this Act”

when an Executive are formed. I accept that the determination itself could be renewed, but I seek clarification on whether there is the power to do so. I may be completely misunderstanding things, but the Secretary of State is indicating that the power will exist to make a new determination, yet subsection (3) indicates that the power “ceases”, so I would be grateful for some clarity.

Karen Bradley: I know that this is very technical, but I am trying to resolve this today, rather than have to come back to the hon. Gentleman. The intention is that a determination made in the current period would reapply in any future period, but the sunset clause means that the power cannot be used. Does that make sense?

Gavin Robinson *rose*—

Karen Bradley: It may be easier if we write to the hon. Gentleman with exactly how it works. The intention as set out is how we intend things to work, but it may be easier if we write to him with the technical details.

Gavin Robinson: That would be useful. The Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and I parsed such issues last night to the point that he questioned my sincerity because of the breadth of the smile on my face. It is useful to seek clarity on the Floor of the House, because the House's intention needs to be clear should there ever be cause for judicial consideration, and I think what the Secretary of State has said is making things clear. I do not claim to be an expert on such matters, but there is an issue with the wording of subsection (3), and I will take the opportunity, once I have concluded my remarks, to withdraw from the Chamber—if that is appropriate—for a discussion with the officials should there be any need to raise the issue again in Committee.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): If a determination was made to reduce pay by a third, for example, is the hon. Gentleman's understanding that that determination would lapse when the Executive re-formed? If the Executive fell again, that cut of a third could be reactivated, but the power would not be there to change that third to a

half or to something else. Whatever is done now is what will happen if the Executive ever collapse again, but we cannot change the amount.

Gavin Robinson: As I have outlined, my concern is that the power ceases once we make the determination and the Executive are re-formed. That is the difficulty. It is not that there would not be the intention or the willingness; it is that the legislation, as currently drafted, removes the power.

Karen Bradley: We do intend that to be the case—I recognise that we are going around the houses slightly—and I suggest that the hon. Gentleman speak to my officials. We would be very happy to go through things. If there is confusion or if something needs to be made clear, we can either put something in the Library or say something in the other place when the legislation is debated there.

Gavin Robinson: I know that you did not expect that exchange of views, Mr Deputy Speaker, but this is important. If we are to pass legislation for Northern Ireland when we have a democratic deficit at home and if we are to use this accelerated process, it is important that we have the opportunity at least to probe and consider things to iron out the contents of any Bill that affects the people of Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State is absolutely right to take the important step of bringing to a close the idea that MLAs will receive a pay increase of £500, and the public will support her. However, we are left in an invidious position by making a decision today without knowing how it will be rectified. If MLAs were doing their job today, the only reason why they would be getting an inflationary increase is that inflation and the cost of living are there and the value of the job has been assessed such that the salary should not just be fixed but increased in line with inflation.

I would love to know what happens when the Assembly is restored. Would Assembly Members receive adequate restitution if their pay rose in line with inflation, as it would for any other worker or public servant in this country? Will the Assembly be placed in an invidious position where, to secure the true value of MLA jobs, one of their first acts will be to rectify the decision not to introduce an increase in April? The indication that the Secretary of State gave today is right, but I am concerned that if that continued for an indefinite period the value and worth of salary attached to the role of MLA would be continually diminished.

Karen Bradley: Those are extremely good technical points, but I am assured that the determination that would be made to stop the £500 increase and a further determination to reduce pay would apply for the period in which an Executive are not formed. If the Executive are reformed, MLA pay will be at the rate it should be, including the £500 increase.

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful for that clarification, which is important in two respects. During the stasis in Northern Ireland, we should not allow a diminution in the value of the role of MLAs or in the worth of their work. More importantly, it should not be for MLAs to set it back again.

[Gavin Robinson]

That leads me neatly on to the representations that the Secretary of State has invited on whether she should proceed with Trevor Reaney's outline proposals. Inviting representations is preferable to a full consultation, because all of us in public life recognise that MLAs, Members of Parliament, local councillors, Ministers and parties should not make determinations about their own pay. Having heard what the Secretary of State has said in our exchanges, I believe that she is mindful of that and does not wish to have a full consultation with parties in which they would determine how she should proceed. I believe that she will proceed in the full knowledge that she has our backing in taking appropriate steps today.

This measure is necessary because we do not have a functioning Executive in Northern Ireland. Even though a programme for government was agreed in October 2016, apparently agreement could not be reached two months later, and the Assembly was brought down as a result of selfish, particular, political, partisan pursuits by one party—Sinn Féin—which, for the past 14 months, has held the people of Northern Ireland and MLAs, along with their willingness and desire for a devolved Assembly, to ransom. It has done so against the needs of its own community for health reform. It has done so against the desires of its community when it comes to inspiring children, investing in their future, supporting education and reorganising our schools in Northern Ireland. It has done so against the wishes of all those who believe in community regeneration, as we do, and who believe in community development, as we do. We see the consequences of its actions coming down the tracks in cuts to neighbourhood renewal in my constituency and other urban areas affected by social deprivation. We cannot do anything about that in Parliament or in the Assembly, because Sinn Féin will not allow it.

That is pathetic. It is a disgrace that, while over the past 14 months in Parliament we have reflected on how shabby that is and how we would far rather have local government, there has been no pressure on Sinn Féin. Who decides that we need to coerce engagement or move on with those who continue to frustrate the development of peace, democracy and parliamentary representation in Northern Ireland? That is not a decision for today, but it is going to have to come, and I encourage the Secretary of State to be bold on it.

I asked the Secretary of State earlier about dark money. How do we get people to recognise that if they are not prepared to take up the reins of government in Northern Ireland, this UK Parliament will take the steps for them? Acting on Sinn Féin's dark money is one way of doing that. For generations, millions of dollars have been flooding into Northern Ireland from the United States—and not just from there. In two weeks' time, there will be a fundraiser for the Easter rising celebrations in Canada. At least \$20,000—given the ticket sale price and the number of spaces available—will be raised there for Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland. Why do I say “Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland”? The answer is clear: the Irish Republic has had the courage to ban foreign donations to political parties within the 26 counties, and in Great Britain we have had the courage to ban foreign donations to political parties, but in Northern Ireland the door has been left open for Sinn Féin to benefit from dark money. We do not need to theorise or speculate about that, or to believe in conspiracy theories,

because Sinn Féin's own fundraisers in the US tell us that they pay for the literature in Northern Ireland election campaigns and pay the phone bills in constituency offices of Sinn Féin Members in Northern Ireland. These people raising money in Canada, America and Australia are continually funding the pursuits of a political party in this United Kingdom via the only part of the UK where this loophole has been allowed to remain open.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): My hon. Friend is right to press this issue with the Government. He will be aware that the website openDemocracy has written volumes about the Democratic Unionist party and donations we received in the Brexit referendum campaign, which we have declared to the Electoral Commission and which have been found to be totally valid and to have met all the lawful requirements of the UK. I have challenged openDemocracy to investigate the millions and millions of dollars in dark money that Sinn Féin brings into this United Kingdom to finance election campaigns here. I have asked it when it is going to investigate this issue and the reply is, “If you have the evidence and you pass it on to us, we will consider it.” Any organisation or website claiming to be balanced and fair-minded and wanting to probe in the interests of democracy should be examining this issue.

Gavin Robinson: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about that, and I agree wholeheartedly. If a website wishes to indicate that it is investigatory, it should be jumping at the chance, heading off with its nose on the scent, following the trail and pursuing this money, which is coming in and corrupting democracy in this country. Although Members are kindly listening to this point in the Chamber, as they have for years upon years, I have yet to hear any definitive political will from colleagues throughout the House to deal with it. Many of them have raised questions about political transparency and donations attached to other parties, but precious few have ever sought to lance this boil and get us to a place where the same rules apply in Northern Ireland as in the rest of the UK.

Sammy Wilson: Does my hon. Friend also accept that this House has turned a blind eye to the hundreds of thousands of pounds obtained by Members who do not take up their seats in this place yet benefit from the money available in this House? Most Sinn Féin MPs will claim, and have claimed, more on expenses for living in London than I have claimed, yet they do not attend this House. We do not have any action taken by the House as a whole on that. It is another loophole that ought to be looked at; this is another source of finance that Sinn Féin obtains that should be closed. Perhaps that is the way of putting pressure on Sinn Féin, because it seems to be keen on getting money from abroad, using electoral loopholes and getting money from this House even when its Members refuse to sit in it.

Gavin Robinson: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have focused on the dark money coming from abroad because it is something on which the Government can act; my right hon. Friend raises the representation money in this House, which is a matter for this House. Again, the same conditions apply: one might get a friendly smile or an acknowledgement of sorts—one

almost of comfort rather than encouragement—for raising this issue, but we will put it to the test and table a motion for discussion by the House.

My right hon. Friend referred to hundreds of thousands of pounds. I got my figures from my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), who in turn got them from the Leader of the House, and they have been published and are a matter of record. We are considering taking steps to reduce MLAs' salaries because Sinn Féin have not allowed them to do their work, but it is important that we also look at the money that Sinn Féin MPs get for doing work in this House, which they do not attend. In 2007-08, they got £90,036. In 2008-09, they got £93,639. In 2009-10, they got £94,482. In 2010-11, they got £95,195. In 2011-12, they got £101,004. In 2012-13, they got £105,850. In 2013-14, they got £109,135. In 2014-15, they got £112,076. In 2015-16, they got £99,415, and in 2016-17, they got £97,556.

When we are considering cutting MLAs' salaries because they are frustrated in doing their work by Sinn Féin Members, it is appropriate that we bear in mind that this House has agreed to a situation in which over the past 10 years Sinn Féin have been given just under £1 million for representation work that they do not do. That is a scandal. The Secretary of State will be well aware of the public criticism and concern about making sure that we do something about MLAs' pay, but where is the enthusiasm and encouragement in this Chamber to deal decisively with the loopholes in respect of representation money and dark money from foreign countries?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I think the point has been very well made. It would not be for this Bill to change that; it would be done in other ways. It would be helpful if we tried to deal with things that the Bill can deal with.

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful for that indication, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think I have fairly outlined what the Government can do and what is a matter for this House but not for this debate, so we shall leave it there.

We must consider how we get to the stage at which MLAs' salaries no longer have to be reduced, and I should say for the Secretary of State's benefit that a poll was published today that indicates the level of support among members of political parties for the positions that the parties have taken. Some 80% of our electorate do not believe that an Irish language Act should be delivered. They believe in our position and have strengthened their resolve in our position since September last year. That is the political climate in which the Minister, the Secretary of State and others will have to resolve things. They are going to need a steely determination and a level of resolve that has not been seen in the past decade from the Northern Ireland Office. In dealing with Northern Ireland's complexities and a divided community, they are going to need the willingness, fortitude and wherewithal to resolve things in the interests of everyone in Northern Ireland—or if not everyone, at least everyone who wants to make it work. We stand ready to form an Executive tomorrow with no preconditions, no red lines and no partisan demands. What is more, almost every other party in Northern Ireland wishes for exactly the same thing.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I will try to resolve outside the Chamber some of the issues that I raised earlier on the Floor of the House. I am grateful to you, Sir, for giving me the time to expand on these issues in a way that is important for our consideration. It is important to press home not only the content of the Bill, but the issues that are pertinent to the current crisis, and, indeed, the resolve required to get to a better place in Northern Ireland.

4.20 pm

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): It is a delight to follow the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). I put on the record that I am absolutely delighted that, at long last, the Secretary of State has taken legal powers to herself, through this Bill this afternoon, to cut MLAs' salaries. She has made it quite clear that she is not going to cut the staff allowances, with which I agree, but she must be decisive. She has been given the powers in this legislation, which will go through all its stages by the fast-track procedure, and she should not shy away from taking decisive decisions about cutting MLAs' salaries. The fact that she has made it quite clear today that the £500 pay increase that was due to MLAs on 1 April will not go ahead is absolutely brilliant news. People in Northern Ireland will be thrilled and delighted by that, but she needs to go further.

The Secretary of State referred to the fact that there was "clear public concern"—it was such a nice phrase—about MLAs being paid their full salary since the Assembly and the Executive collapsed 14 months ago. "Clear public concern" is a very pleasant way of describing what has been mentioned to me in the clearest terms of fury by my constituents and people beyond North Down. They have expressed their rage, disgust, anger and fury about MLAs receiving their full salary. Therefore, beyond announcing today that the £500 increase will not go ahead on 1 April, the Secretary of State must not dither any longer about using the powers that she will be given and entrusted with today to cut MLAs' salaries.

Reference has been made time and again to "hard-working MLAs." I do not detract from that—we do have hard-working MLAs—but let us just look at that title. MLAs are Members of a legislative Assembly. They are supposed to be legislating and taking Executive decisions. They have not been doing that for 14 months.

The Assembly collapsed in January 2017. It was exceedingly good of Trevor Rainey, a very distinguished civil servant, to come out of retirement to do his independent report on salaries and allowances, reflecting the disrepute into which this issue has brought the Northern Ireland Assembly. Many people have expressed to me their view that, if this issue were not dealt with firmly, why on earth would we have a Northern Ireland Assembly? So the issue of MLAs' salaries is corroding public confidence and public respect in the Assembly and I do not want to see that. I want to see the Assembly and the Executive restored for the betterment of all of our people in Northern Ireland. Although I do not wish to detract from those who have been described as hard-working MLAs, they are not doing the full range of functions for which they are receiving their full salary. If they are not legislating and not taking Executive decisions, they absolutely do not deserve to receive their full salaries.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I would be very interested in the hon. Lady's opinion on two key matters under consideration. First, as the abbreviation MP means Member of Parliament, does she agree that those so-called Members of Parliament who do not take their seats and involve themselves in the legislative process should not be entitled to the allowances and payments that they currently receive? Secondly, she talks about the restoration of devolution, and the DUP agrees with her that it is important for the people of Northern Ireland. Does she have a view on the Irish language Act, and does she believe that Unionists should concede to it to get the Executive functioning again?

Lady Hermon: Let me take the right hon. Gentleman's very helpful points one by one. In respect of Sinn Féin, if the right hon. Gentleman, as a sort of homework, cares to look—as I am sure he does—at the written questions that I have submitted, he will see a long line of questions to the Leader of the House asking that representative money to Sinn Féin be considered by this House. In my most recent written question to the Leader of the House, I asked her which parties she had consulted regarding the thousands and thousands of pounds of representative money that is paid to Sinn Féin. I was astounded, to put it mildly, when the reply came back that the Leader of the House had apparently had no discussions with any political parties about the reduction of representative money to Sinn Féin Members, who do not take their seats in this House. I would be delighted to join in common cause with the right hon. Gentleman on this issue, so that we might, in fact, take it further because it is quite outrageous.

There are seven Sinn Féin Members of this House, who do not take their seats because of their political views. They receive representative money, which was invented—I stand to be corrected on this—in February 2006 by the then Prime Minister, and that irritates and grates on me, as an independent Member. As I am not a Member of a party, I receive no representative money, no additional Short money and no additional secretarial and administrative allowances, even though I do take my seat and represent my people from North Down. It is a bone of contention about which I feel very strongly and which I would like the House to address, so, yes, it is a good point for the right hon. Gentleman to raise.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked me to address the issue of the Irish language Act, which is deeply divisive in Northern Ireland. However, I commend his party leader, Arlene Foster, who we know has made valiant efforts in this regard. We know this because the draft document, indicating the detailed discussions that have been taking place between Sinn Féin and the leadership of the DUP, was put into the public domain by some journalists, including Eamonn Mallie. This was very encouraging.

It is a great regret to me that the Irish language Act seems to have been the issue that brought everything tumbling down. It is divisive, but given the great good will from the right hon. Gentleman's party leader and from the leader of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland—although I am sure that the leader of Sinn Féin for all the island will also have to be consulted and have her penny's worth—I would like to think that the generosity and leadership that were definitely evidenced by the draft document could be evidenced again and that we could

get our Assembly up and running again. The Secretary of State would then not have to worry about explaining to the hon. Member for Belfast East whether this determination will come down immediately that the Executive are restored or whether it could be reinvented if the Assembly were to crash again. I do not want to prepare for the Assembly crashing again. I want the Assembly and the Executive up and running, so that this place does not have to take back powers. I hope that that answers the questions of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: It does.

Lady Hermon: In the meantime, the Secretary of State has been bold today. I encourage her to continue in that vein and to be very bold in terms of following the excellent recommendations of Trevor Rainey, bearing in mind the disrepute into which the Assembly brings itself if MLAs continue to receive their full salary. That is not doing MLAs any good at all, despite their hard work.

4.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the chance to conclude this debate from the Back Benches.

I often feel like someone who is stuck on a merry-go-round and cannot get off. We have an election and Members are elected. They take their seats. An issue with a governmental scheme is raised. The opportunity is taken to collapse the Assembly and a new election is called. People are elected again and refuse to take their seats, not because of a heating scheme or because of a failure to build trust but because of a militant, politicised Irish language Act—nothing more, nothing less. Hospitals in chaos, schools in turmoil, and roads in ruin: all because of a militant, politicised Irish language Act. There is no discussion of the RHI scheme, only of a militant Irish language Act.

Here we are today discussing the cutting of MLAs' pay, and all because of—let us all say it together—a militant Irish language Act. That is what this is about. We are not here to vote on giving the Secretary of State the ability to cut pay because the MLAs are incapable: quite the opposite; they are very, very capable. We have some of the most brilliant young minds, and bodies, trying to do the work but being prevented from doing so. I commend my colleagues Simon Hamilton, the former Economy Minister; Michelle McIlveen, the former Agriculture Minister; and Peter Weir, the former Education Minister. To be fair, we also have two other MLAs in my constituency: Mike Nesbitt from the Ulster Unionist party and Kellie Armstrong from the Alliance party. They all work extremely hard, but they are prevented from taking part in the Assembly.

When we were feeling the beast from the east in Northern Ireland, the girls in my office sent me pictures of them attempting to get in to work. An executive decision was then made by my parliamentary aide that the girls who had made it into the office could leave just before the amber warning took place at 3 pm to ensure that they were safe. I joked that I appreciated them using a half day's annual leave to leave early. I did not mean it, of course—I just said it facetiously to give them a bit of a laugh. There was almost a revolution in the office, but that is by the bye. The options were open

to me to penalise them, but obviously I was never going to do that because it would have been totally unfair. There is definitely a part of me which says that our MLAs, and those from all the other parties, are trying to do the work but being prevented from doing so, and it is unfair to penalise them for something out of their control. It would be easy to say that. However, returning to the office, if the girls were unable to come in for two days a week indefinitely, then I would obviously have to consider whether they would justify a full wage. Even though it was out of their control, I would have to come up with a new way of doing things. That is what this is all about.

I acknowledge that this is out of everyone's hands—other than members of Sinn Féin, of course, whose only desire and aim is to break Northern Ireland and who do not care how this is achieved. Yet the consequence of these actions is that we must penalise all the MLAs. The constituency offices in my constituency are running at full speed. The MLAs are working extremely hard, as other Members of Parliament will confirm. I know that because I work very closely with my MLAs and the MLA team to handle the sheer volume of casework in the constituency that arises when there are no Ministers in place and no decisions taken by senior civil servants. There is no doubt in my mind that MLAs are continuing to work to the highest capacity that they can. I hear of them meeting constituency groups out of office hours, going above and beyond. They do that night and day. They are available Monday to Friday, and most weekends, too, as requested, yet they are paid to legislate at the Assembly and are not doing so. We recognise that, and that is why we are here to make this decision.

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) made a considerable contribution to the debate and outlined the case that we all adhere to. It is with a heavy heart that I support the cutting of MLAs' pay, because it is simply not fair. They want to do the work but are prevented from doing so. In the same way that, if a drunken youth throws a brick through your window and you have to pay for the repair even though you did not do it, it is not fair. This is one of those times when life is not fair.

When someone in other areas of work cannot come to do the job, they do not get paid for that day, and that is what will have to happen here. It is coming very close to that. I have a real fear that the longer this goes on, the more good young men and young women we may lose from our legislature. We have tremendous young talent in all parties in the Assembly who can do great things. We do not want to lose them from the political process for years. It concerns me as an MP, as I am sure it concerns other Members, that those people, with their breadth and depth of talent, could go and get a job elsewhere, and we could lose them forever from the political process, which would mean we have to start again.

Not getting a full wage may be okay for some people who have minimal costs, but for those who have full mortgages to pay and children to raise, a decision will be taken on whether they are better off in the paid job they had before trying to make a difference in the Assembly, with unsociable hours and massive pressure. That is the choice they made, and many will stand by that choice in the hope that decisions made in this place will shortly enable a full Assembly to be up and running,

or clarify what we can expect from people who have been elected to do a job, yet are being prevented from doing it.

The thing that galls me most is that those who are responsible for no agreement are not here today to defend their cause. Their bodies have never darkened these green Benches, but they have darkened the halls of the House of Commons. My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East outlined clearly what benefits they have got out of that. They are never here to represent their people or their viewpoint, whatever that may be, and it is indefensible. They merrily continue to claim their expenses for not working in this place in Committees and so on like the rest of us, yet they have flights and so on paid. I am sorry, but at some stage, all Northern Ireland has to stop paying the price for their intransigency, and we must move forward.

The Bill provides the power to cut MLAs' salary. That must be done, and done soon. The people are tired of inaction. I am tired of inaction, and it is important to note that the MLAs are tired, too. They want to do their job and are prevented from doing so. We should not for one second think that they are enjoying working outside of the Assembly. For a start, they are not working a three-day week. They are still working full-time, in the daytime and in some cases the night-time.

Furthermore, there is nothing enjoyable about meeting constituents and being questioned and asked to help when it is not possible to give them the help they need. They are not enjoying being lambasted by people who are beyond frustrated—and understandably so. They are not enjoying seeing some things happen and other things not happen. If the Assembly were allowed to meet, they would be allowed to do their work on that. They are not enjoying being held to account for something they are not responsible for, but they are doing their job, which is, more importantly, their passion.

We should give credit to all MLAs who work so very hard to create a working Northern Ireland where our children can be educated and have job prospects and housing, safe within the Union of this wonderful United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The future of our nation is in the balance, and that is why most are pushing through and keep trying, despite the unbelievable frustration.

In conclusion, Sinn Féin do not want to play ball. We should end the game and allow the pitch to be used by those prepared and anxious to play. Some time in the very near future, we will have to look at a different political process. If they do not want to be part of that process, they should step outside it and let those parties that want to be part of the process take over, have a Government and move forward. We should send the message today that direct rule looms, and indeed it is starting to happen today through this process. When your constituents feel that they are unrepresented, Sinn Féin, that is all on you and your militant, politicised Irish language Act.

4.39 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) has been performing in Westminster Hall during most of this debate—he always performs so well—and my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) has already spoken, it falls to me to give a brief response to

[Nic Dakin]

this excellent debate. As my hon. Friend said earlier, we fully support what the Government are proposing, and I echo the views of the hon. Members for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), for North Down (Lady Hermon) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

The hon. Member for Strangford said that this is being done with a heavy heart, but it is the right decision to cut MLAs' salaries and we support it, and it is also the right decision not to cut the salaries of staff.

4.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Shailesh Vara): I thank all Members on both sides of the House who have contributed to the debate. While there has been some reluctance, there has clearly also been broad agreement that this is the right way forward.

Let me say at the outset that it remains our overriding priority—one that I know is shared by Members across the House—to see devolution restored. However, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, the ongoing payment of full salaries to Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly is a matter of public concern. The Bill will allow us to address that by empowering the Secretary of State to make a determination to change pay and allowances in the current period and to provide a safeguard against the present situation recurring.

I am grateful to the Members who have spoken, particularly the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) and the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). We often talk about Committee as the time when we undertake line-by-line scrutiny. In the hon. Gentleman's case, the Secretary of State and I felt for a moment that we were in Committee, because his very sharp legal mind was going beyond line-by-line scrutiny to word-by-word scrutiny. That was certainly noted by all those present, but he clearly illustrated what a gain he is for this place and what a loss he is to the legal profession.

Gavin Robinson: Even if I was wrong?

Mr Vara: I was being charitable. The order of the day for this debate is very much that people should be brief—most were in line with that—and I will follow in that tradition.

We have taken advice on MLA pay and considered it, and we are now putting the Secretary of State in a position to act, pending any further representations from the Northern Ireland political parties. The previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), received and published Trevor Reaney's advice in December, and the current Secretary of State has considered it very carefully.

We are now at a point where we simply cannot go on paying MLAs at their current full salary. As the Secretary of State made clear, we want to decide and finalise our approach by the end of this financial year. The measures in the Bill are necessary and proportionate in the interests of public finances, public services and public confidence in Northern Ireland, in the absence of a devolved Government. For those reasons, it is important that we are ready to act on MLA pay.

I stress again the Government's commitment to the restoration of devolved government. That is our overriding priority, and the measures in the Bill do not undermine or contradict it, with powers remaining firmly in the devolved space. We will continue to support the Northern Ireland political parties and to work with the Irish Government towards resolving the differences that have stopped the parties reaching agreement. This Government are steadfast in their commitment to the Belfast agreement, and we will work tirelessly to see the devolved institutions restored. This Bill will allow my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to vary the pay and allowances of MLAs in the light of the lack of a sitting Assembly.

I am mindful of the fact that I do not want to detain the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) or prevent him from saying all he has to say in his Adjournment debate. I know that he has prepared a three-hour speech, which he will now have to cut because of the length of this debate. I am determined that he should be able to have his say, and on that basis, I urge that the Bill be read a Second time.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Bill considered in Committee (Order, this day).

[SIR LINDSAY HOYLE *in the Chair*]

Clauses 1 and 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 6 to 10 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

DEFENCE

That the draft Armed Forces Act (Continuation) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 25 January, be approved.

BETTING, GAMING AND LOTTERIES

That the draft Gambling Act 2005 (Operating Licence Conditions) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001 (Powers of Seizure) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 1 February, be approved.

ANIMALS

That the draft Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 8 February, be approved.

RATING AND VALUATION

That the draft Non-Domestic Rating (Rates Retention and Levy and Safety Net) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 8 February, be approved.—(*Julian Smith.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Musgrove Park Hospital

4.47 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I rise to present a petition for a new surgical centre at Musgrove Park Hospital, supported by 6,100 people from Taunton Deane.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Taunton Deane,

Declares that the current condition of some of Musgrove Park Hospital's operating theatres are not up to the high standards expected in the NHS; further that the pre-1948 buildings that house the operating theatres, intensive treatment unit and high dependency unit are now outdated and are no longer fit for purpose; further that the hospital's plans to build a new surgical centre in a more central location would complete the redevelopment of the surgical facilities and provide six new endoscopy rooms, eight operating theatres and a further twenty-two critical care beds; and further that the patients and staff at Musgrove Park Hospital deserve the very best facilities to enable them to maintain their outstanding rating for patient care.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the Petitioners in their efforts to raise the standards in Musgrove Park Hospital to build a new Surgical Centre.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P002122]

Speed Limit in Spatham Lane, Streat Lane and Underhill Lane, East Sussex

4.49 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I rise to present a petition, signed by over 1,500 people in my constituency, to ask for the lanes around the villages and parishes of Ditchling, Westmeston and Streat to be designated as quiet lanes, with reduced speed limits, so that they are made safer for all road users. The petition was initiated after the terrible accident of horse rider Beverley Berrill in Spatham Lane just a few months ago, which left her severely injured; tragically, her horse had to be destroyed. The petition asks for Spatham Lane, Underhill Lane and Streat Lane to be considered for designation as quiet lanes as a starting point for making all the country lanes in the constituency of Lewes safer for all road users.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the current national speed limit in use on Spatham Lane, Streat Lane and Underhill Lane in the County of East Sussex is unsuitable as it is a danger to other users of the lanes, notably equestrians; further that the Petition follows an incident that took place on Spatham Lane during September 2017 whereby a car collided with resident of Ditchling Mrs Beverley Berrill, who was on horseback; further that the accident resulted in the temporary hospitalisation of Mrs Berrill and the termination of the horse; and further that the incident has resulted in distress for local equestrians who wish to exercise their use of the local lanes in safety.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reclassify said roads as quiet lanes, or alternatively reduce the speed limit of the said lanes from its current national speed limit classification, to ensure greater safety for equestrians and other users of the lanes.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002123]

Royal Bank of Scotland Closure

4.50 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I rise to present a petition collected from the people of the town of Nairn, concerned at the closure of their Royal Bank of Scotland branch.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey,

Declares that proposed closure of the 4 branches of the publicly-owned Royal Bank of Scotland in the areas of Grantown, Nairn, Aviemore and Inverness will have a detrimental effect on local communities and the local economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Her Majesty's Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Royal Bank of Scotland to take into account the concerns of petitioners and take whatever steps they can to halt the planned closure of these branches.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002125]

Birmingham Commonwealth Games and Shooting

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

4.51 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure, Mr Deputy Speaker. It has been almost a year since I have had a personal Adjournment debate, but it has only been 24 hours since I was involved in one. This has been the week of the three Jims—Jim Fitzpatrick on Monday night, Jim McMahon last night and Jim Shannon tonight.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): One might argue that it is Jim Shannon day today, as you are on your third speech.

Jim Shannon: My speechwriter is exhausted.

I have been seeking this debate for eight or nine weeks, and I am very pleased to see the Minister in her place. We are all very fond of her and grateful for the work that she does. She was a guest speaker at my association's dinner in Strangford some time ago, and she had a chance to meet the Comber Rec women's football team, which I know she enjoyed—my team enjoyed it, too. We look to the Minister for some guidance tonight on how we can take this forward. I have some suggestions that I hope might be effective.

I want to put on record my thanks to Mr Speaker for allowing this issue to be aired, and I am glad to see many hon. Members in the Chamber to support it—I hope. They may just want to make an intervention to get their own back—[*Laughter.*]

Coming from Northern Ireland and with a neighbouring constituency whose Member refuses to take his seat, I am used to taking on issues that have an effect more widely than Strangford. Birmingham is slightly further than I usually stretch, but I am concerned about the issue of the Commonwealth games 2022, and I believe that other hon. Members here tonight are also concerned about it. It is not about Birmingham per se, but about the recognition of shooting sports and the fact that that entire category has been removed from the games without appropriate foundation.

I put on record that I am a member of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation and of the Countryside Alliance, and have been for more years than I care to remember. I am also a member of several shooting clubs, and I served in the Army, which gave me a chance to shoot weapons legally.

The proposed sports programme for the Commonwealth games 2022 in Birmingham does not include any of the shooting sports. There is a large petition on this. A number of right hon. and hon. Members are here to put that on the record, because it is important. I hail from Northern Ireland, and there are those who say that we are too familiar with guns, but this is not an issue of gun control. It is an issue of sport—a sport at which I believe we are pretty good. Some might ask, why do the people of Northern Ireland excel in boxing and shooting? It is a hard one to answer.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Shannon: Yes.

Tracey Crouch: In part, I wanted to do that just to know what it feels like to intervene on the master of interventions, but I do have a serious intervention on his point about the success of shooting in Northern Ireland. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in congratulating veteran shooter David Calvert, who, having first competed in Edmonton in 1978, has been selected for his 11th Commonwealth games? Having won eight medals in that time, including four golds, he has inevitably inspired many others to compete in Commonwealth and Olympic games.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for taking the opportunity to intervene on me—I quite enjoyed that. I also say how pleased I am that David Calvert is a member of Comber rifle club in my constituency. I have met him on a number of occasions, and he has been the most successful shooter for Northern Ireland.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am glad that the Minister mentioned David Calvert. I was a member of Comber rifle club when I was about 12 or 13. I remember him coming and showing us his gold medal for Kuala Lumpur, and I remember just how inspiring that was for young kids such as me who were involved in target shooting, who wanted to progress and who wanted to do well. If shooting is not in the Commonwealth games, that inspiration for young target shooters will not be there in future. Perhaps my hon. Friend could reflect on that.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that up. I will not go far down memory lane, because I go down memory lane further than most, but the fact is that my introduction to shooting and target sports was as a young boy of about 10 years old in the '60s—the late '60s, I have to say, because that gives me a couple of extra years. My cousin Kenneth Smyth—hon. Friends will know that he was murdered by the IRA—was always an inspiration to me, and I particularly value the time that he spent with us as young boys, introducing us to shooting. Whenever we went down to our grandmother's and ultimately to meet Kenneth, the highlight of that holiday for us was the .22 rifle and shooting at targets down on the farm. In those days, restrictions were a lot less rigorous than they are today, and the fact was that we were able to do that. That was our introduction to the sport. My hon. Friend said that he was introduced to it as a 12-year-old at Comber rifle club. That is very important as well.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): May I also say how much I enjoy the opportunity of being able to intervene back on the hon. Gentleman after all the times that he has intervened on me? He raises a really interesting point about youngsters shooting. A lot of people turn around and say, "Isn't this abhorrent? You can't have youngsters shooting," but actually, I was taught how to shoot at a very early age. One of the great things about teaching children how to shoot is that they learn an incredible amount of discipline and an incredible amount of respect for each other and for sport. We end up with very responsible young adults coming out as a result of all the discipline and camaraderie that we get around shooting sports.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for saying that. He is absolutely right. The introduction to shooting sports at a very early age puts a discipline in place and an interest. I will talk later about my boys and my children and the opportunities that we have had. My son Jamie and I shoot together. I took him shooting from a very early age, and he is a much better shot than I am, by miles. My granddaughter Katie—she is the third generation—is also interested in shooting. I see the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) across the Chamber on the front row—he takes his son with him when he goes shooting. I know how important it is for someone to have that relationship with their child and to have the chance to introduce a fantastic sport that can do so much. I thank the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) for that intervention; it is exactly one of the points I wanted to make.

A joke often touted in my local shooting club, where I am a member, is that they have asked for a couple of my election posters for target practice. I never would say no if they wanted to do that. There were other election posters, but obviously I was in no position to offer any other than my own, so mine were used—I was just happy they were used and recycled in some way.

My local shooting club hosts a very successful event called “the Swaziland cup” at which amateurs and the more professional come together to win the cups and in the meantime raise hundreds and thousands of pounds for the children of Swaziland. The club also hosts the little choir when they come for an afternoon of safe fun and good food. We do it every year they come. I have never won the Swaziland cup, by the way, but there is always next year. That is how it works. It is the same with fishing: I have not caught that big fish yet, but I am going to catch it next year. That is how it goes.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): The sport of shooting in my area is great. We have a rifle club not half a mile from where I live, and the young people who go along learn not only discipline but a great sense of camaraderie that they carry with them for the rest of their lives. It would be a retrograde step if they had not something to aim at—excuse the pun. Let us be honest: they get involved to improve and expand the sport and to take part in competitions—and what greater competition is there than the Commonwealth games? It is something they should be encouraged to attain to—something we should be inspiring them to achieve—so it would be a retrograde step to remove shooting from the Commonwealth games.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend, like others, reinforces what we all know: the introduction of the sport of shooting to young people from an early age develops character, friendships and accuracy—and, of course, we hope that some will attain perhaps even a Commonwealth medal.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has two hours before the House has to adjourn, given the number of interventions. On a serious point, however, I must note how many people are here for his Adjournment debate. I do not think that any other Member is held in the affection and warmth that we feel for him. I speak as a Glasgow MP. Obviously, we had the 2014 Commonwealth games, and we had shooting—not in the east end of Glasgow, but

at Barry Buddon—and I commend his remarks tonight. We must make sure that this is not a retrograde step and that we see shooting at the Commonwealth games in Birmingham.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. I am just pleased to see a goodly crowd here to support an important issue and a sport at which we excel.

Target shooting has a real place in our community, and the skills of those who play deserve recognition. This is a sport in which we are recognised. The connotations of gun violence must be removed from this discussion, because these are legitimate, law-abiding, licence-holding people who have the opportunity to shoot. Those who wish to use a gun for nefarious reasons are not target shooters; they do not follow the rigorous legalities that come with owning and shooting a gun; they are the ones who buy through the back door, instead of coming with a licence through the front door, and that should be said at the outset.

I wish to thank all those organisations and individuals who contacted me and sent me information on this subject, including the Countryside Alliance, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation and the sports societies. The following information was provided by the British Shooting, which covers a range of shooting sports and offers varying levels of support and expertise. I spoke to the Minister before the debate to say I believed there was something we could do, and I look to her now with genuine hope that she will take this in the direction we want. The following are the facts of the case: the 2022 games were originally awarded to Durban, South Africa, with a sports programme that embraced all the shooting sports—shotgun, rifle and pistol, airgun and full-bore rifle. The Durban organising committee was unable to obtain satisfactory financial guarantees from the South African Government, however, and unfortunately had no option other than to relinquish responsibility for the games.

The Commonwealth Games Federation sought alternative hosts, and a bidding process was opened. In England, the cities of Birmingham and Liverpool put forward outline bids. The Liverpool bid included shooting, after constructive dialogue with British Shooting and others. Birmingham’s bid team did not engage with British Shooting or, it appears, any other shooting body—that was very disappointing, and I do not think the procedure was followed correctly—and did not include shooting in its bid. It should have done so. The Birmingham bid was put forward to the CGF, and it was ultimately awarded the right to host the games.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for introducing the debate, and I am very concerned by the suggestion that there may have been an ulterior motive behind the exclusion of shooting from the Commonwealth games on this occasion that is being dressed up as a logistical problem—the problem that Bisley is too far away from the location. Has the hon. Gentleman any specific indication that the people who are hosting the games this time are in some way ideologically opposed to target shooting?

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for making that point. As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am always very wary about what I say, and I would

[*Jim Shannon*]

rather put the facts of the case and let the right hon. Gentleman draw his own conclusions, but yes, some people would say that that is something that may be lingering in the background. When the Commonwealth games took place in Manchester, Bisley was used as a location. Why not use it this time, given that it is closer to Birmingham than to Manchester? That seems perfectly logical to me.

I am very pleased that Birmingham's bid was successful, and, indeed, I supported it. By extension, it has benefited the whole United Kingdom. The Commonwealth games should benefit everyone, not just those in one particular place. To host games of this calibre is a feather in our cap, and well worth the money that it entails. I welcome Birmingham's contribution and its efforts. In normal circumstances, however, the decision to award the games to a host city and a Commonwealth games association is made at a CGF general assembly, even when there is only one bidder. That usually takes place some seven years before the games.

Following the late withdrawal of South Africa, the CGF executive dealt directly with the decision to find a replacement, which meant that Birmingham's bid and, significantly, its proposed sports programme were not subject to debate by the 72 member nations of the CGF that would be normal practice. I suggest that in this case normal practice was not followed and that it should have been. What I am asking, in so far as it is within the remit of the Minister's responsibilities, is for that normal procedure to be followed.

Mark Garnier: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again; he is being incredibly generous with his time.

I must declare an interest as a member of the National Rifle Association and the Rifle Club at Bisley. It seems to me that it would be perfectly simple for the shooting sports to take place at the National Shooting Centre there, not only because it is available but because that would provide a very good income for the National Rifle Association. Is the hon. Gentleman surprised as I am that the association is not pushing as hard as it can to ensure that we have shooting sports in the Commonwealth games? If it is not pushing as hard as it can, why not?

Jim Shannon: That question is in my mind as well. Why not? I believe that there are now many thousands of signatures on the petition. I hope that the CGF is listening to the grassroots, because they are saying, "Are we all swimmers? Are we all runners? Some of us are shooters, and we will not feature in the Commonwealth games." I will not, certainly—but these are our games, and we want to see opportunities for all disciplines to feature there. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: that should happen, and the grassroots support for it is very clear.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I, too, should declare an interest. My nephew Joe Hendry will represent Scotland in the wrestling in the Gold Coast Commonwealth games next month. I am sure that Members will join me in congratulating him and wishing him well.

The hon. Gentleman is advancing a compelling argument about the need for continuity in sports. Young people taking part in sports need to know that there will be a future in the work that they are putting in. That should apply to all disciplines, including shooting.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is the first time he has intervened on me, but I have lost count of the number of times I have intervened on him. I thank him for attending the debate, and he is right that going to the Gold Coast games is a tremendous achievement. Wee Amy Foster from my constituency has just been notified that she has qualified for those games as well, so I know how important that is and how important it is to encourage young people to do these things.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. Those of us representing Welsh constituencies share his great disappointment that shooting will not be taking place at the 2022 Commonwealth games. Do you agree that perhaps the UK Government could take the lead and organise a similar international competition somewhere else in the country?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. As this is an Adjournment debate with several Members present, I cannot allow the hon. Gentleman to address that remark to me rather than to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Chris Davies: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and what he says is absolutely right. I look forward to the Minister perhaps being able to exert influence in places we do not seem to be able to, to see whether that can happen.

In 2015, the CGF general assembly in Auckland approved a new strategic agenda, "Transformation 2022". Approval of this general direction embraced, by default, much detail, including changes to the list of so-called compulsory sports as well as the overall quota of athlete places in the games. Shooting remained an optional sport, while many others attained compulsory status. It should be noted that the consequence of the decision did not have an impact upon the Durban bid, which included all shooting sports. Again, I suggest that that omission—or whatever it might be—needs to be looked at.

Shooting sports have been omitted from the games on only one occasion, in 1970. On other occasions, when shooting sports have presented logistical challenges to host cities they were addressed, particularly in England in 2002, when the option of Bisley was agreed upon even though the games were hosted by Manchester. As I have said before, I have had the privilege—at least once in my life, in any case—to shoot at Bisley, with the Army back in the '80s, and I greatly enjoyed that experience. We were never going to win the encounter, by the way. It was like reaching the FA cup final: getting to the final was our big occasion, so we were very pleased to be there, even though we knew we were going to get walloped—and we were.

Dr Julian Lewis: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to come to Bisley every year with the Commons rifle team, where we have the privilege of shooting against the Lords team. In passing, may I pay tribute to a now retired member of the House of Commons staff, Mr Gary Howard, who worked in the Vote Office for many years? For a long period he gave freely of his lunchtimes—week in, week out, and month in, month out—to tutor Members of both Houses of Parliament in shooting skills and was rightly rewarded with the British empire medal when he retired for his long service in the House, his service to shooting and his service to young people.

Jim Shannon: When my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) and I were elected in 2010 we joined the House of Commons rifle club; we really enjoyed getting the badge, to tell the truth, because we wanted to show everybody we were in it. We particularly enjoyed going down and shooting at lunchtimes, and I suspect that many other Members have also enjoyed those lunchtime engagements.

As I have said, in the Manchester games Bisley was a venue, and it can be again. Shooting is a traditional Commonwealth sport, and for many of the smaller Commonwealth nations shooting sports are among the very few sports in the programme that they can realistically select athletes for and therefore play a part in the games. Some of the countries that excel at shooting sports perhaps do not excel at any other sports, and I will name some of them, as I think that is important: Jersey, Gibraltar, the Isle of Man, Guyana, Norfolk Island and the Falkland Islands. Shooting sports are crucial to their meaningful participation in the games and to their way of life as well.

For larger nations such as India, Malaysia and Australia, the absence of shooting sports has a major impact on their team size and their medal winning. Closer to home, the teams of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all regularly secure a significant medal haul from the sport. Information I received from the Countryside Alliance states:

“Shooting contributed 15 medals to England’s medal tally at the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, and England has won a total of 168 shooting medals in all previous Commonwealth Games—more than any other competing nation and over 20 per cent of the medals available.”

That is even more than Northern Ireland!

Mark Garnier: Further to the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the hon. Gentleman is very welcome to come along to the match between the House of Commons and the House of Lords. I am the captain of our team.

The hon. Gentleman has mentioned the contribution of the smaller Commonwealth countries, but he has missed an important point about shooting sports. We need to remember that this is the one sport in which men and women compete equally against each other. We have just had International Women’s Day, and it is really important that we should not be getting rid of sports in which there is no gender discrimination. We should be celebrating this sport.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention.

The 2018 Commonwealth games in the Gold Coast, Australia, which were mentioned earlier, will include four shooting disciplines: full bore, pistol, rifle and shotgun. The shooting programme will be held at the Belmont shooting centre in Brisbane, where 20 athletes from Team England—the mother country—will compete in 19 separate events. There needs to be a commitment not only for Birmingham in 2022; I am seeking a commitment from the Commonwealth Games Federation to include shooting in the 2026 games. We need to look forward and ensure that what has happened this time does not happen again. The Minister referred to David Calvert in her intervention. He will shortly be competing in Brisbane, and my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) was inspired by him many years ago. I am sure that many other young boys and girls were inspired by him as well. That is why I am raising this issue today.

Two key international bodies oversee the shooting sports that appear in the Commonwealth games: the International Shooting Sport Federation and the International Confederation of Fullbore Rifle Associations. Both have indicated a willingness to work with the CGF to find a solution to keep shooting sports in the games and on the 2022 programme. Both are willing to do more than most, and representatives met the CGF president in February this year. This is about finding solutions. When people come to me with problems, it is not about the problem; it is about the solution. We bring the issue to the Floor of the House to seek a solution, and we hope that that solution will be forthcoming. At Olympic level, the ISSF represents a category C sport, recognising its growing and significant contribution to the Olympic ideals and family.

Having four disciplines, shooting sports can be delivered flexibly, both in terms of which disciplines appear and in terms of location. The preferred position is, naturally, to embrace all four disciplines, and I would encourage that. That option could be delivered at Bisley, as was the case for the successful hosting of the 2002 Manchester games. Bisley has the capacity to do that. It is not unusual for some sports to be outsourced remotely in that way, with examples including shooting in Malaysia in 1998, shooting in Manchester in 2002, shooting in Glasgow in 2014 and track cycling and shooting in Brisbane in 2018. All those events involved shooting, yet we have a big void at the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth games. As London’s Olympic and Paralympic games and Glasgow’s Commonwealth games all showed, the UK is the world leader in providing low-cost temporary facilities to ISSF standards. It can be done, and it should be done; there are many out there who want it to happen. Equally, some shooting sports could be accommodated easily in Birmingham in the many existing arenas that the city is home to. I encourage the sporting authorities to consider that.

I have been reliably informed that the ISSF, the ICFRA and British Shooting are all willing, ready and able to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the CGF and the host city to accommodate the sport in the 2022 games. Many organisations, individuals and right hon. and hon. Members are keen to add their support. I urge that the matter be considered and acted upon while we have the time to do so, and I look to the Minister to bring that about.

I did not intend to speak for the full two hours, and I am sure that everyone in the House is thinking, “Thank the Lord for that.” I will conclude with this point.

[Jim Shannon]

My granddaughter Katie is nine years old, and I took my son Jamie shooting when he was younger than that and introduced him to a sport in which he is now fairly proficient and much better than his dad. My granddaughter Katie has started to go hunting with her dad and me. It is a family tradition, and if the tradition continues, perhaps the child will better the father. My son is a better shot than I am, and perhaps my granddaughter will be a better shot than my son.

Dr Lewis: This is positively the last intervention that I will make on the hon. Gentleman. In support of the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) about the sport being gender-neutral, I should have declared an interest as the president of the Colbury rifle and pistol club in the New Forest, where the champion shooter is a young lady called Molly. I think she is still in her teens, and she has on more than one occasion shot 100 out of 100, something I have never managed to do and I fear I never will manage to do.

Jim Shannon: There is still hope—you just never know—but I think my days of shooting as accurately as that are a long time gone. We have a couple of young ladies at the Comber Rifle Club, and both are holding their own at that level against the men, which is good stuff.

Chris Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so generous with his time and letting me intervene yet again—I shall try to conform to the rules this time, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have heard a lot about male and female shooters and about young shooters, but we have not heard so much about those at the other end of the scale. A former constituent of Brecon and Radnorshire, the late Lord Swansea, won gold medals at both the Olympic and Commonwealth games at the grand old age of, well, his late 60s and early 70s, so shooting is open to everyone.

Jim Shannon: As I said, there is hope for everyone, and I think everyone has been covered now. Thinking of the Gold Coast games, it is significant that there is opportunity for disabled people. I know from my time as a shooter over a vast number of years that even those who are visually disabled or in a wheelchair can still excel, win and beat the able-bodied.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): My hon. Friend spoke passionately about his granddaughter Katie pursuing shooting as a sport, perhaps in competition. He may be aware that when the Commonwealth games fell through for Durban there was some talk that Northern Ireland might make a bid to host the games, perhaps supported by our neighbours in the Irish Republic. Of course, they have not yet rejoined the Commonwealth, but we look forward to the day. Does my hon. Friend join me in aspiring to the day when his granddaughter will shoot for Northern Ireland as Northern Ireland hosts the Commonwealth games for the first time?

Jim Shannon: Yes, absolutely. I thank my right hon. Friend for that. It may be aspirational, but it is something that we would all love. We always love to see our sons and daughters doing well, and we want to see our

grandchildren do well. I want to see Katie beating her dad at shooting, and hopefully that will happen. I have no doubt that she would beat her grandfather every day, but I hope that she will beat her dad, too. I hope that Katie will be some shooter in the years to come, and I would love her to be a member of Team GB or of the Northern Ireland team at the Commonwealth games. We would also love to see the Republic of Ireland come back into the Commonwealth. That may be a bit aspirational and not terribly likely, but that does not stop us thinking about it and wishing for it to happen. The Commonwealth games will not be representative of our own wee Northern Ireland if games without shooting become the norm. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) said, it should never be the case that we opt out of shooting when hosting the games.

We hosted Olympic shooting, and will do so again at the first opportunity. What an outcry there would be if there were no athletics—no long jump or high jump—or swimming. I believe that there should be an outcry out of concern about shooting sports. Let us do what we can and secure the sport for the future gold medallists among us—perhaps not us, but our families—and provide shooting in Birmingham in 2022. As the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) said, at the age of 68, you never know what you will do.

5.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for introducing this important debate. I am grateful, too, for the contributions from colleagues, especially those who mentioned their fantastic shooting clubs. The Whip has asked me to mention that he, too, has a fantastic shooting club—Kelbrook shooting lodge in Pendle—which, I am sure, inspires many youngsters in his community and, indeed, older generations to become involved in shooting.

The hon. Member for Strangford is passionate about this issue from a personal, local and national perspective and I think that his speech has reinforced that view beyond the Chamber. I would like to wish our home nation shooting squads the best of luck at the Gold Coast games starting in 13 days, 16 hours and 33 minutes. Across the United Kingdom, we should be proud of our teams heading to Australia, and I know that they will do their best to succeed and to bring back gold, silver and bronze to showcase their respective nations.

Northern Ireland is sending 88 athletes and has a good record at the Commonwealth games. I hope that after a heavy day of discussion on legislative issues this debate will provide an opportunity to mention the positive power of sport and the inspiration it brings to many people, young and old, beyond the challenge of politics. Fast-forwarding to the 2022 Commonwealth games in Birmingham, we all welcome the positive opportunities that hosting an event such as the games can bring to Birmingham and the UK as a whole. The games will showcase Britain to the rest of the world, providing new economic growth and trade opportunities to the west midlands and beyond. In addition, the games will leave a legacy of new and refurbished sports facilities in Birmingham and the west midlands, including a fully refurbished Alexander athletics stadium and a brand new aquatics centre in Sandwell.

The Government have been working closely with its partners, Birmingham City Council, Commonwealth Games England and the Commonwealth Games Federation to begin plans for delivering a unique and exciting games in 2022. The appointment process for the chair of the organising committee was launched last week, and plans to deliver an amazing handover ceremony at the end of the 2018 Gold Coast games are also under way. We hope that, with the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting around the corner, the handover ceremony will be a great opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to the Commonwealth movement and to show the world what Birmingham has to offer.

Hosting the Commonwealth games is no small undertaking and a number of important decisions need be taken to ensure that the city of Birmingham delivers the best games possible. One of these decisions is the sports programme for the event. The programme proposed by the Birmingham 2022 bid team and approved by the Commonwealth Games Federation is now being put into action. I should explain that, when bidding to host the Commonwealth games, a bidding city is required to develop a sports programme within the technical requirements set by the Commonwealth Games Federation, which requires all host cities to include a number of prescribed core sports and then select additional sports from a list of optional sports.

Shooting is, and always has been, an optional sport, and that status was reaffirmed by the Commonwealth Games Federation general assembly in 2015. That motion was voted on by the federation's members, in line with its constitution, and it is not a decision with which any Government can, or should, interfere. So the first thing to say is shooting was considered for potential inclusion in the Birmingham 2022 programme under the optional sport banner.

A number of other considerations have to be taken into account when developing a sports programme that best meets the needs of Birmingham 2022. For example, a fixed quota of athletes must be complied with. So it is not simply the case that all sports could be included, even if this were feasible. In addition, Birmingham was awarded the Commonwealth games with just four and a half years in which to deliver it, rather than the usual seven.

I have no doubt that the city will deliver an outstanding event, despite the timeframe, but this does mean a number of additional practical considerations must be taken into account, including what sports facilities exist across the UK, their proximity to Birmingham and the west midlands and the level of financial investment required to make them suitable to host the games within the timescale available. The city also considered its wider objectives of showcasing high-quality competition, gender equality in medal events and a strong and developing para-sport programme. In balancing all those considerations, the decision was taken not to include shooting in the 2022 Commonwealth games bid. Rather, the optional sports and disciplines submitted as part of the bid instead include three-on-three basketball and three-on-three para-basketball; track cycling and para-track cycling; mountain biking; diving; rhythmic gymnastics; and para-triathlon.

I am sure the whole House would agree that this combination of optional sports will complement an exciting and inclusive programme. If all of the other factors I have outlined did not apply, we would of

course like to include a full spectrum of sports and disciplines. However, the important considerations relating to the size, scope, scale and deliverability of the games meant that Birmingham had to make difficult decisions. I understand the disappointment that many, including colleagues in this House and, especially, the athletes, will feel with this decision, but it is one that the Commonwealth Games Federation accepted the bid on.

The decision not to include shooting in 2022 should not be considered a reflection of the importance of the sport. After success in Rio and the trajectory of success across global competitions, UK Sport is providing £6.9 million of funding for the Tokyo 2020 shooting performance cycle—

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Tracey Crouch: I think the “PARLY” app would explode if I did not.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for giving way. I was trying to be helpful in asking for a copy of my speech to be sent to her Department before this debate and I hope that was done. The International Shooting Sport Federation and the International Confederation of Fullbore Rifle Associations have indicated a willingness to work with the CGF to find a solution to keep shooting sports in the games and in the 2022 games programme. In February, so no more than a few weeks ago, they met the CGF president, and at an Olympic level they have been to see all these different people who they think they can influence. What I am really saying, if you do not mind my intervention being a little long, Madam Deputy Speaker, is that many people wish to make this happen. I am asking the Minister to use her efforts to see whether this is possible, ever mindful of the fact that Bisley wants to make its facilities available. As Manchester did it in 2002, I do not see why Birmingham cannot use Bisley, if it is made available and if all those organisations want to make this happen.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention, which gives me the opportunity to re-emphasise and make clearer the point I made: Birmingham put in a bid to the CGF with its optional sports programme and shooting was not in it, and the CGF accepted the bid without shooting in the programme. My fear is that, if the CGF and Birmingham were to change that, it would challenge the bid that has already been accepted. But I am sure that officials and the Birmingham team have heard that intervention. They will certainly have heard the passion with which he and other colleagues have spoken about shooting. Let me reiterate that we certainly recognise the importance of shooting. As I was saying, UK Sport is continuing to provide millions of pounds for both the Tokyo 2020 shooting performance cycle and for para-shooting in Tokyo.

The hon. Member for Strangford is a reasonable man. He will appreciate the technical rationale behind the difficult decision that Birmingham took as part of its bid process and appreciate that that bid was accepted by the CGF. I am always happy to discuss these issues with him further and to keep him in the loop in respect of the conversations with the federation and the international organisations. I am just not in the position to be able to say whether anything can change at this point.

Chris Davies: The Minister has acknowledged that the athletes will be disappointed that shooting is not happening at the 2022 games. Will she commit the Government to supporting British shooting beyond the Olympic games and show that they are prepared to support British shooting into eternity?

Tracey Crouch: I assure my hon. Friend that UK Sport continues to invest funding into elite-level shooting sports and that there will be funding for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic cycle. That investment will continue. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend asks from a sedentary position about the period beyond that. The decisions for beyond Tokyo 2020 will come in the run-up to 2020; there is always an eight-year funding cycle for elite sport.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister and the Government reconsider the funding of the shooting part of the games, if that is part of the issue, and be ever mindful that Bisley wants to make its grounds available? I gently remind her that I referred in my speech to how the process for Birmingham was arrived at. I suggested that it did not follow normal practice. Let me mention what normal practice would be. When Durban was declared not to be available, Birmingham made its bid. The CGF executive dealt directly with the decision to find a replacement, such that Birmingham's bid and, significantly, its proposed sports programme was not subject to debate by any of the 72 nations. I suggest that the process that should have been followed was not followed. With that in mind, I think it should be reviewed.

Tracey Crouch: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that, although the CGF worked on an expedited timetable, it certainly followed the process that it needed to follow, and Birmingham was the successful bid and was awarded the games. I recognise that he, other Members and athletes are disappointed that shooting will not be in the 2022 programme, but re-emphasise that that is no reflection of what we all think about the success of shooting. I shall continue to listen to the hon. Gentleman and other colleagues to make sure that these opinions are shared with the CGF and others.

Gavin Robinson *rose—*

Tracey Crouch: I shall take one last intervention.

Gavin Robinson: To build on the question in my hon. Friend's last intervention, given that there is a desire to encourage greater participation and that the Minister has obviously indicated the willingness of the Government to support shooting more generally, would the Government welcome a bid from the shooting fraternity in the UK to organise an international competition that could run alongside or coincide with the timetable of the Commonwealth games?

Tracey Crouch: We look at all bids from international sports and put them alongside other event strategy decisions. If there were a bid, we would pay attention to it in the same way that we do when we make decisions on lots of other bids. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we continue to support many bids from Northern Ireland for whole island international sporting competitions.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) *rose—*

Tracey Crouch: No, I will not give way again. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ahh."] The hon. Gentleman had his chance much earlier on, before I got to the last sentence of my speech.

I recognise the disappointment that Members around the Chamber are feeling right now, but I do hope that the whole House will join me in wishing the hundreds of athletes representing the home nations the very best of luck at the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth games and will offer Birmingham continued support in its preparations for 2022.

Question put and agreed to.

5.39 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 21 March 2018

[MIKE GAPES *in the Chair*]

Welfare Reform and Work Act

9.30 am

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. This debate marks two years since the passage of the Welfare Reform and Work Act, which received Royal Assent on 16 March 2016. It brought in several key changes: the four-year benefit freeze, a further reduction in the benefit cap, a cut to the family element of tax credits and the introduction of the two-child limit, and removal of the work-related activity group component from employment and support allowance. It also saw changes in the work allowance within universal credit, leading to a 63% taper, and further housing benefit cuts. Those cuts had hit people in the private rented sector previously, but were now brought in to hit the social rented sector.

The problem is that we cannot look at the 2016 Act in isolation, because it comes on top of the cuts in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and, in fact, Budget changes going right back to 2010. We have seen eight years of relentless attacks on the most vulnerable in our society. Two groups particularly hit were the disabled and children. In 2008 incapacity benefit was changed to employment and support allowance; and, as the National Audit Office has highlighted today, 70,000 people were underpaid because their right to income-related employment and support allowance was not recognised. The Government are undertaking to pay back all that money by next year, but people have spent nine years without money that they were owed. Interestingly, the Government will pay back only to October 2014 and not any earlier arrears. That is a bit funny, because when we have to pay the Government, somehow there is never a statute of limitations.

In 2013 there was the move from disability living allowance to personal independent payments. Those are meant to cover the additional costs relating specifically to disability; they are not meant to be work related. They are also meant to allow someone with a disability to study or work and achieve the best that they can.

Both employment and support allowance and personal independence payment require a fair assessment of someone's disability, or indeed ability. Instead, people got work capability assessments. Those are really the key problem for people who are disabled. The process was outsourced initially to Atos and is now outsourced also to Capita. The Government aspire to depend predominantly on face-to-face assessments. A key issue is the gradual reduction in sourcing other evidence, despite the claimant assuming that the Department for Work and Pensions will source other evidence regarding their underlying condition.

I can accept that we would want to look at someone's capability and not pigeonhole them, but knowing what underlying condition they have can tell us whether that is something that will change, improve or never improve. There have been repeated assessments of people with chronic conditions and deteriorating conditions, congenital abnormalities and permanent injuries, such as amputations or spinal injuries. People with terminal diseases have been recalled for repeated assessments.

There is a particular problem regarding the assessment of people with mental illness or learning disability. I am sure that every MP will have had cases in which there has been poor recognition of how a mental illness affects someone's abilities. I had to raise in this place the case of a constituent who had complex post-traumatic stress disorder after serving in the Gulf war—to the point where he struggled ever to leave the house. He was on DLA at the highest rate. He was moved over to PIP at the highest rate and then called for reassessment, at which point he was moved to the lower rate. He appealed, which of course many people do because of the high rate of change of assessment when people appeal. That shows how poor the original assessments were.

However, following my constituent's appeal, all his points were taken away, and what my caseworker heard back when inquiring was, "PIP is really for people who can't carry out the basic tasks of daily life. People with mental illness can of course wash themselves, cook, clean and shop." Well, that is said by someone who has never seen profound depression, which looks like the batteries have simply been taken out of someone. That issue appears again and again in all our casework inboxes. The other conditions we are talking about are those that wax and wane. Someone may attend for assessment on a good day and they are often bullied into saying what they can achieve on their best day. That is not a realistic assessment of what their life is like.

As Scotland takes over some of the benefits, we are aiming to treat people with greater dignity. We will ensure that we have sourced the medical information and try to ensure that the assessor is equipped with the clinical skills to assess the person they are viewing, because that process has become really traumatic for people who are suffering from disability.

Under PIP, more than half of people have lost some or all of their benefits, particularly the mobility element. Many of us have been involved in trying to hold on to mobility cars for some of our constituents. We have seen the distance that people need to be able to walk reduced to 20 metres. Frankly, that is the distance from the car park into the supermarket; it is not a distance that would allow someone to walk to their nearest bus stop, or to walk from the bus stop at the other end to wherever they are trying to go. Then people's unpaid carers lose carer's allowance. That means that the impact on a disabled family can be huge.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Is my hon. Friend aware of a recent report commissioned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission called "The cumulative impact of tax and welfare reforms"? It showed that, overall, the changes to taxes, benefits, tax credits and universal credit meant that households with at least one disabled adult and one disabled child would lose more than £6,500 a year, which is more than 13% of their annual income.

Dr Whitford: I am, and I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. The problem with all the changes, going right back to 2010, is that there never was a proper cumulative impact assessment to look at what changes on top of changes have done and what happens to people who are in more than one group. We know that lone parents are impacted by changes, but what if a lone parent is also disabled?

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that all the changes in the welfare legislation should be seen in the broader context of other policies, such as the rise in the national living wage, which is lifting some of the lowest paid people in this country out of poverty?

Dr Whitford: I will come to that point later in my speech, if the hon. Lady is happy to wait.

In addition, carers are now subject to conditionality and treated as jobseekers, regardless of what their caring commitments are. That means that they may be open to sanctions. In 2013 we had the infamous bedroom tax, which thankfully in Scotland we have been mitigating, but which has impacted on people with disability, who will lose 14% of their housing benefit if they are deemed to have a spare room. Many disabled people require additional space, whether that is for complex equipment or because they need to sleep separately from their partner, or because they routinely or occasionally require someone to stay over when they are not well.

With the Welfare Reform and Work Act we also saw the removal of the work-related activity group component from employment and support allowance. We spoke out against that repeatedly. Taking £30 a week away from someone who has been defined by DWP assessors as not fit to work will most certainly not get them back into work. That impacts particularly on people recovering from major illness. As a cancer surgeon, I have seen for myself the impact on people who have gone through a year of intense surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy and the time it takes to get back to work. We are talking about extra heating, because they are at home. In England, we are talking about prescription charges and car parking charges at hospitals, both of which, thankfully, patients in Scotland do not have to pay. Is it any wonder that this Government have been criticised by the United Nations for breaking the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities? It has been a relentless attack.

The stress has increased the mental health issues suffered by people with disability. A survey has shown that over 40% have at some time considered suicide. What kind of society are we, if we are not willing to look after those who are vulnerable? We can judge a society by how it looks after its most vulnerable. As these disability benefits come to Scotland, it is our aim to use a human rights approach and ensure that dignity is at the centre of how we treat people.

Carers should also be supported and valued. They save the state millions of pounds by providing virtually free care. In Scotland, one of the first Acts that will come in next year will increase the carer's allowance to at least the level of jobseeker's allowance. It is little enough, but it is at least a declaration of intent. It is envisaged that employment support allowance is to support those who, due to their disability, are simply unable to work. PIP is meant to allow those with disability to reach their full potential. We should not be

sticking people in their houses, because we take away their mobility, and then saying, "We are trying to get them into work." People with disability who are working have extra costs, and that is the whole point of PIP, so the Government should put their money where their mouth is.

We also know that child poverty is rising and is expected to rise further. We have seen it climb by about 5%. The poorest areas in the UK now have child poverty rates of around 50%. How can that be right, when we know the impact that will have on children? But while we talk often about child poverty, we should recognise that it is actually family poverty, and that children cannot be separated from the experience of their family. Their income has been hollowed out since 2010. We saw the benefit cap in 2013 set for families at £26,000 a year. That affected about 20,000 families. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 cut that to £23,000 in London and to £20,000 elsewhere in the UK. That affected 88,000 families, who lost either £3,000 or £6,000 from their income.

In 2011 we saw the local housing allowance brought in to cut what was paid for those living in the private sector. It reduced housing allowance from the median in their area to 30%. But in 2016 that was frozen and in a third of areas it does not even come close to 30%. In London, housing benefit for those in the private rental sector will cover only 16% of their housing costs, meaning that they fall about £1,000 a month short. That is significant for anybody's wallet, but for those at the lower end of income earnings it is a severe hit. That has led to over 4.5 million people in the private rented sector struggling as rents have soared.

In 2016 the Government cut the family premium that was allowed with a new claim or a new birth, leading to a loss of £907. The bedroom tax also affects families, particularly in situations of separation or divorce, because the parent with minor caring responsibilities is not recognised. For example, a man—most likely—now living on his own in a small flat is not allowed a bedroom that would enable his children to stay over when he has them for the weekend. What does it say about us that we are not trying to strengthen families, but actually trying to undermine them?

Tax credits, which had such a big impact on child poverty, have faced attrition since 2011, when the first thing to go was the baby element, removing over £500. The 2012 changes saw families over £700 worse off. We all remember the haggling in the Chamber about changes to tax credits and the Chancellor stepped back from doing it after the Lords objected, but that was because he knew that those tax credit changes were simply hidden within universal credit and that, therefore, eventually they would hit everyone. The Government have removed the family element for the first child, again over £500, and now tax credits are claimable for only the first two children. The third child in a family loses out £2,780 a year. That has a huge impact on such families.

Universal credit has also reduced the work allowance. That means that it will often not be worth the while of the partner in a family—the second earner—going out to work, because they would lose so much and, particularly when childcare is taken into account, could end up worse off than if they did not take the extra work. The Government always talk about making work pay, but they do not always follow through.

The policy from the 2016 Act that has had the biggest and widest net, dragging more people into poverty, is the benefit freeze. Again, that comes on top of a 1% cap that was in place from 2013. The holding down of all working-age benefits has been in place for a number of years.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will the Scottish National party and the Scottish Parliament use the powers they have to raise taxes in order to end the freeze on benefits in Scotland?

Dr Whitford: We are already looking to raise more money to mitigate some of the cuts from here but, frankly, with our budget dropping over 8% between 2010 and 2020, it is simply not possible for a Government to mitigate everything that comes from here. This place has to take responsibility. We are already spending £450 million on mitigating changes that came from here. So all the hon. Gentleman is asking is that the Scottish Government should keep sending their budget back to Westminster.

Alex Burghart: If the benefits freeze was to be unfrozen in Scotland, people in Scotland would be receiving additional benefits that people in the rest of Britain would not receive. Consequently, it would seem fair if that came out of Scottish tax take. The Scottish Parliament has the ability to raise taxes, but the hon. Lady is declining to do so. Why is that?

Dr Whitford: That is what I am saying; we are already mitigating £450 million in benefit cuts from this place. We are not here to talk only about Scotland; we are actually talking about the suffering right across the UK. Some hon. Members in this place like to imply that Scottish National party MPs do not care about people in the rest of the UK, but I have friends and family here, as many of us do. The source of the benefit freeze is the Department for Work and Pensions—this place—and it has to be fixed at source.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I commend my hon. Friend for her meticulous and erudite speech. Does she agree that the benefit freeze, even by its own measure, is going beyond what was predicted? That is suggested by the DWP's own figures and the figures that the SNP has obtained from the House of Commons Library, which suggest that the increase in inflation means that £3 billion extra will be saved by the DWP from the benefit freeze.

Dr Whitford: Yes. That is exactly what I will move on to. Obviously, the former Chancellor, George Osborne, justified the benefit freeze because at the time inflation was 0.3%, but inflation now, due to Brexit and the fall in the value of the pound, is officially 3%, as measured last September. By 2020, low-income families will be over £830 worse off, just due to the benefit freeze. If we look at the cumulative cuts, an average family will be £1,300 worse off. But if we drill down into families that have three or more children, that builds up and becomes eye-watering.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady is being extremely generous in giving way. I want to ask about the principle behind what she is saying. I was not an MP when the benefit freeze was introduced, but I believe the logic was that at that point benefit spending was rising much

faster than average earning. Does she think it is right that spending on benefits should go up faster than the average earnings of people in the country? Does she think that should be the case, and is she advocating for that to continue now?

Dr Whitford: I am advocating that inflation is now ten times what it was when the policy was brought in, and that therefore this policy should be re-thought. It was never imagined to have such a punitive impact. As my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) said, the return to the Treasury has been much greater than planned, so the Government could easily afford to unfreeze benefits. That measure is having a particular impact on the poorest.

Like the point raised by the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), the Government and the Conservative party claim all the time that they are helping the poorest through other actions. The number one thing that is always quoted is the national living wage: not the real living wage, which is 95p an hour higher, but the pretend living wage. The Office for Budget Responsibility, however, points out that this does not offset the benefit cuts. The increased earnings owing to the national living wage will be £4 billion a year by 2020. The benefit cuts are three times that: they will be between £12 billion and £13 billion a year. I am sorry, but the Government and the Conservative party cannot hide behind that claim. They are still taking £8 billion from the poorest families.

The other thing that is always quoted is the raising of the personal tax allowance. That obviously has a bigger impact if someone pays tax, but only £1 out of £6 spent by the Treasury on raising the personal tax allowance will end up being for people in the lower half of the income distribution curve. Unfreezing benefits would be much more targeted—even excluding child benefit from that and focusing on all the other benefits would have the biggest impact on helping poor families.

Other benefit cuts have specifically impacted on children and families with children. The health in pregnancy and Sure Start maternity grants were both cut, even though we know the importance of the first 1,001 days after conception. That is about the health and nutrition of the mother and the early years of the child. We know that the impact of poverty affects children life-long; it reduces their educational attainment and tends to limit their job prospects. They are much more likely to end up on benefits in the future. It also affects their health. They have higher rates of physical and mental health issues than those in affluent families. They are at greater risk of addiction, of ending up in the criminal justice system, of committing suicide and of being in a road traffic accident or a house fire.

All that costs money. Mitigating in later life the issues that come from child poverty is estimated to cost the Treasury almost £6.5 billion a year. If there is no change in direction from the Government, we expect 200,000 more children to be growing up in poverty by 2020. I suggest to the Minister and the Government that they do not spend £6.5 billion mitigating suffering in later life, but invest in early years now.

9.52 am

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes.

[*Rachel Maclean*]

I congratulate the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) on securing this important debate. It is a pleasure to follow her speech, which raised some very important issues. As Members of Parliament, we all want to ensure that the welfare system operates correctly. I am a strong believer in what the Government are doing on welfare and find myself, once again, in a debate about welfare reform. I am glad to be here, because one of the Government's most important jobs is looking after those who are unable to look after themselves. I am proud of what this Government have done during the time I have been in Parliament, and of the record since the 2010 coalition Government and the Conservative Government that followed.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The hon. Lady talks about how proud she is of this Government's actions, but by the time this debate concludes, at 11 o' clock, St Stephen's church café in Redditch will open as a food bank. Does she not understand that there is a clear correlation between this Government's actions on welfare reform and the food banks in her constituency?

Rachel Maclean: I visited the food bank and have spoken to the people there, but time does not permit me to talk in depth about those issues. I have an ongoing dialogue with both the people who run the food bank and the people who use it. I understand very well what is happening in my constituency of Redditch and, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for moving on, I will speak about some of my experiences with universal credit and the jobcentre there.

I will focus my remarks on universal credit because it is a key plank of the Government's reforms. Since my election, I have made it a priority to understand what services exist for my constituents who face challenges, whether those are unemployment, poverty or physical and mental health problems. As a constituency MP, I understand very well what is going on. There are areas of deprivation in Redditch, as there are in every constituency up and down the country. It is up to the Government to ensure that the help is on the ground, where it is needed.

It is important to revisit the principles behind the drive to reform the system that we inherited from the last Labour Government. In that system, people had little or no incentive to get back into work. When they did, they found themselves worse off and liable to lose money if they took on more hours or a better paid job. How could that be right?

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire talked about tax credits. It is my understanding from DWP statistics that tax credit spending ballooned from £1.1 billion at its introduction to £30 billion a year by 2015. I do not think it is right to spend such a rapidly escalating amount of GDP on benefits. That indicates there is something fundamentally wrong at the heart of the system.

There is widespread public support for the principle that welfare should be not a life sentence, but a lifeline as someone transitions through difficult circumstances or the loss of a job. The old welfare system had become labyrinthine in its complexity, with a number of different benefits adding to the confusion over what someone was entitled to. It was not a system that gave people a ladder to a better life, but rather one that trapped them in worklessness and poverty.

Dr Whitford: Does the hon. Lady recognise that more than 60% of people who require support are working, but are stuck in low-income jobs? Surveys show that very few of them are out of working poverty 10 years later.

Rachel Maclean: I do not agree with that, because the evidence does not bear it out. Universal credit is an agile system that is designed not only to get people who are out of work into work, but to support them as they look for better-paying jobs. I will come to that in my speech.

I accept that reforming welfare is difficult, as the hon. Lady said. There can be no MP in this House who has not come across heart-breaking cases where the system has failed. Those are wrong, and we all stand up for our constituents, but they are not evidence of a failing system—rather, they are the inevitable consequences of a large and challenging public sector reform process. Since I have been in this House, I have seen Ministers listen to problems and make changes to fix the system. Recently, we have seen adjustments reflecting concerns raised on both sides of the House, which are welcome. We hear much criticism from the Opposition, both the SNP and the Labour party, on this. It is extremely easy to criticise from the Opposition Benches, but no real constructive alternative is offered.

I have made it my priority to visit the jobcentre and speak to local people on the ground in Redditch. These are just a few of the experiences that I have heard. My local jobcentre manager has worked there for 30 years. She described the system as “working very well” for her clients. She said that it is “the best system” she has seen in her 30 years as a jobcentre manager and that it helps people “who really need help”.

The first example is a customer who was seen by a work coach when universal credit first went live. The customer had a very difficult personal background. She was totally disengaged when she saw the work coach and she was quite difficult to work with. The work coach encouraged the customer to gain upskilling in maths and English. With the work coach's help, she found work. The customer is now working in a role where she wants to help others to find work. She even shares knowledge of vacancies with her former work coach to encourage other people to find work.

Another example is a customer who had been on and off benefits since 2012 and was working with a work coach. This customer struggles to make eye contact and lacks confidence. Over time, the work coach established a rapport and helped him to gain confidence. They referred him to work experience with a local retail outlet. When he attended, the work coach asked if there had been any changes. The customer looked them in the eye and said, with a smile on his face, “Would that include the fact that I've got a job?” The coach said that they are “delighted” and “so glad” that they referred him to the retailer in the first place, and:

“Seeing the customer smiling about his success really made my day.”

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Maclean: This must be the last intervention. I am aware that others wish to speak.

Drew Hendry: In that case, I am grateful to the hon. Lady for allowing me to intervene. She is recalling the experiences of DWP managers in her case studies, but how many claimants has she spoken to directly to get their stories?

Rachel Maclean: I have spoken to claimants in local organisations on the ground.

Drew Hendry: How many?

Rachel Maclean: Many. I can write to the hon. Gentleman with the precise numbers, if he would like me to.

I will touch on another example. A qualified hairdresser had been a carer and was a single parent to her disabled children. She found it difficult to find work to fit around her responsibilities. Her work coach suggested that she consider self-employment and she was referred to the new enterprise allowance in February 2016. She commenced self-employment, hairdressing in care homes, from April 2016.

By April 2017, she had expanded her business by 200% and was nominated for entrepreneur of the year by learndirect. At the ceremony on 4 July, she won the award. She was delighted and said it was all down to the initial push and referral from her work coach, followed by support.

After the meeting, she sent an email to the work coach, which said:

“Thank you for meeting with me yesterday, I felt very positive after our appointment. This is the first time I have ever been out of work and in this situation so was dreading the whole ‘Job Centre’ scenario. I don’t know what people complain about, so far everyone I have encountered has been really helpful and proactive.”

Is it not time that we had more such stories in the media, instead of the negativity we are always hearing from this place?

At the heart of the system are the work coaches, who offer tailored, individualised support to help people. Last week, I was privileged to open Redditch Nightstop, a centre for young people living in family-supported housing, where I did indeed meet claimants of the system, which the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) asked about.

I talked in depth with the local jobcentre manager. Her feedback was that she was able to join up the local courses offered by Redditch Nightstop with some of her clients, who would otherwise struggle to cope with basic life skills. That type of system is a positive step forward that enables people on the ground, who know the local sources of support, to access them and to gain confidence. Universal credit works with those clients, not against them.

I am aware that other hon. Members wish to speak, so I will keep my remarks about older workers brief. I have often spoken in Parliament about the discrimination faced by older workers in our society. I am an older worker myself, but age should not be a barrier to entering a new career or occupation, retraining or upskilling, provided that it is a positive choice.

In addition, because skills shortages affect many businesses now that we have virtually full employment—thanks to the work of this Government—many businesses are realising that youth is not everything when it comes

to employing staff. B&Q has long been a champion of that policy, and it has reaped many accolades in the process, but other household names are now championing it too.

The Government have introduced many measures, including the fuller working lives strategy, to provide real support for the objective of achieving human potential at any age. The strategy states that ageist stereotypes should be challenged and older people should be allowed to contribute, as many want to. I believe, as do the Government, that work is not just an economic proposition. It allows people to have a purpose in life, to improve their mental health and wellbeing, and to retain their independence and autonomy.

To support that with practical measures, the Department has expanded the older claimant champion network in all 34 Jobcentre Plus districts. The champions work collaboratively with more than 11,000 work coaches and employer-facing staff to raise the profile of older workers, highlight the benefits of employing older jobseekers and share best practice. Recent research indicates that older claimants found that support useful. Further analysis of the provision for older claimants is ongoing. When the Minister sums up, will he tell us when the Department will publish the impact assessment, which was promised for spring 2018?

Anne Willmot was recently appointed as Business in the Community’s “Age” campaign director. She speaks of the challenges that an older population faces. Ageism is rife; a 50-year-old is 4.2 times less likely to be invited to interview than a 28-year-old. We need to support those with health issues and caring responsibilities to prevent them from leaving their jobs, and to deal with the discrimination and bias in recruitment that have made it so hard for the over-50s to secure employment.

I welcome any update from the Minister about what more the Government can do on that issue. Taken together, those policies, and many others, will help to achieve the aims of a welfare system that works for everybody, at all stages of life.

10.4 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) on securing this important and timely debate. I have come to the debate to offer my views from a practical, not an ideological, point of view. I pride myself on being a constituency MP. When I go to my surgeries in Parkhead, Baillieston, Easterhouse or Cranhill, people do not tell me how wonderful the system is. When I go to the jobcentres that are left in my constituency, because the UK—

Alex Burghart: I am also a constituency MP and I take my casework very seriously. Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that it is not the nature of casework that people come and tell us when things are working? People come and tell us when things are not working. Naturally, we see an unrepresentative portion of the population.

David Linden: As well as being a constituency MP who does surgeries, I spend two hours every week door-knocking in my constituency. I do not regularly find people opening their door and saying to me, “This welfare system is absolutely fandabbydozy.”

[David Linden]

This week marks two years since the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 implemented some of the most punitive cuts from this Government. Some of those were a fresh round of cuts, and some built on the cuts made in the Welfare Reform Act 2012. This debate allows us the opportunity to shine a bright light on the damage caused by those punitive welfare reforms, which have had a direct impact on some of the most vulnerable people in my constituency. I will address two policy areas in my remarks: first, the punitive benefit freeze, which leaves people out in the cold, quite literally, while the cost of living soars, and secondly, the medieval two-child policy and abhorrent rape clause.

Figures commissioned by the SNP and put together by the Library show that, based on the spring statement 2018, between 2018-19 and 2020-21, the benefit freeze will save an additional £3 billion compared with what was forecast for those years in the summer Budget 2015. In November 2017, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation said that the benefit freeze means that between 2010 and 2020, a couple with two kids will be £832 a year worse off. It has also said:

“The freeze is the single biggest policy driver behind rising poverty by the end of the Parliament.”

The impact of the poverty premium means that people on low incomes face higher costs as a proportion of their income than those on higher incomes, due to the nature of products and services. People on low incomes often cannot pay for goods or services by fixed direct debit, but for many things, such as mobile phone bills, energy bills and bank cards, companies only offer discounts based on people signing up for a direct debit.

Economic shocks such as the breakdown of a car or a washing machine are far more significant for people on a low income. I know that from direct experience, having spent two years working at Glasgow Credit Union. One of the most heart-breaking things about being in that job was people coming to me for loans to pay for a washing machine that had broken down or for school uniforms.

Sadly, that is the reality we are now in. I am disappointed that that lived experience did not come into the previous speech. We see it week in, week out when we do our constituency surgeries. With all those factors, the benefit freeze is an additional financial burden on disadvantaged people. The Government must urgently restore the real value of benefits by scrapping the freeze.

The second issue I will raise is the Government's medieval two-child policy that would frankly make China blush. The idea that in 2018, we are saying to families, “Two children in your family—that's it. The state won't pay for any more than that,” sends a strong signal from this place. [Interruption.] If the Minister is unhappy with that, I am more than happy to take an intervention—absolutely not.

Dr Whitford: Will my hon. Friend give way?

David Linden: I am happy to give way to my hon. Friend, though.

Dr Whitford: Does my hon. Friend accept the basic premise that we have an ageing population and we need people to have children so we can balance that? Instead, we are relentlessly punishing people who have children.

David Linden: Absolutely. The Government have often spoken about their family test for policy. I do not think that turning round to a family and saying that they can have only two children is appropriate, given that family test.

The Women's Budget Group has said the cut to child tax credits will disproportionately hit black, Asian and minority ethnic women, who tend to have larger families. The idea that we put victims through the trauma of having to prove to the Department that their child was born as a result of rape sends a strong signal from the other side of the House. It is not something we would do in Scotland.

That is precisely the point, because this legislation, which has been on the statute book for two years, genuinely has an impact on the “just about managing” families that the Prime Minister spoke about when she took office. It is not too late for the Government to think again and implement a social security system that delivers social justice, fairness and, above all, dignity for the most vulnerable in our society.

10.9 am

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) on securing this debate on a very important subject. Although I disagree with her on several points, I fully respect the tone in which she delivered her remarks.

Something that has not yet been spoken about today is the context in which many of the welfare reforms since 2010 were introduced. In 2010, as we all remember, we faced a broken economy and a broken welfare system. We had a deficit that was spiralling out of control. There was a very real threat to public finances and a danger that if Britain did not control its spending, the international bond markets would take action against us, further undermining our ability to pay for our essential public services. That was acknowledged across the House at the time and still holds true.

At the same time, but for entirely different reasons, the welfare system that we inherited was not fit for purpose. Over many years, through no grand design, it had grown into a system of great complexity that was confusing for users and expensive to administer. It had to be reformed. Peculiar, perverse disincentives had arisen, not because anyone had wished for them but because different benefits clashed at different points in the system. The most obvious and regularly cited example is that people were disincentivised from taking more than 16 hours of work, but many people were also disincentivised from moving into the initial stages of work at all. Unfortunately, the system often trapped people out of work or in low wages. That was completely unacceptable, because we all know the importance of work.

Neil Gray: Is the hon. Gentleman seriously still attempting to use the banking crash to justify the cuts to welfare? That is what they are: reform would be one thing, but these are cuts to social security. Are the bankers seriously still to blame for the projected 7% rise in child poverty over the next few years?

Alex Burghart: As the hon. Gentleman will have heard from my opening remarks, there are two issues at play. The first was the broken economy. As I have said, if the Government had not taken action to dramatically reduce public spending—[*Interruption.*] Our deficit has been cut. The hon. Gentleman suggests from a sedentary position that that was in 2008 and the situation is different now. Our deficit has been much reduced by the actions of this Government and the coalition Government over the past eight years, but it has not yet been fully eliminated.

Once the deficit is fully eliminated, we will be able to do the most important thing, which is to start to reduce debt as a proportion of GDP. That is essential, because at the moment we are spending more on servicing our debt than on defence, on education or on our police forces. None of us wants that. Effectively, we have created a new “Department of Debt” that sits in Whitehall and gobbles up money. I want to see the budget for that Department cut year by year, but only the steps that this Government are taking will achieve that.

Let me return to my point about the broken welfare system. Regardless of what happened in 2008, it was essential that the welfare system be reformed to encourage more people to take more work and benefit from all the associate factors surrounding it. We all know that there is great dignity in work and that it provides pride, purpose and a great example to children. It is what we want for ourselves and for our constituents.

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he recognise that well over half a million fewer children are living in workless households now than in 2010? Children are five times more likely to be in a low-income household if they are in a workless household than if they are in a household in which all adults work. There is a knock-on effect for the next generation.

Alex Burghart: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for stealing my thunder and taking away my next paragraph. Yes, I am fully aware of that fact and she is right to emphasise it. One of the great things that has happened since 2010, which must be acknowledged in a balanced debate on the subject, is that we have achieved record employment in this country. Unemployment has fallen substantially—in all constituencies, I believe—but it is unfortunate that so far my hon. Friend has been the only hon. Member to welcome that in this debate.

It is right to talk about the full package. Yes, there have been cuts and freezes to welfare payments but, as my hon. Friend mentioned, they must be seen alongside increases to the national living wage, increases to the tax threshold, a new offer on childcare and the creation of universal credit, which enables people to progress in work without the disincentives that existed before. Alongside all that, the most important thing that has happened is that far fewer people are in out-of-work benefits. When we talk about assessments that people may have lost money under the welfare changes, we must always acknowledge that this is a dynamic system. The whole point is that people move into work and progress in work so that they earn more money. I fear that that has not been acknowledged in this debate.

The Welfare Reform and Work Act introduced several changes, as hon. Members have already mentioned, but they must be seen in the context of fairness. The welfare

cap limited the amount of money that some families receive, because it was deemed by Parliament that it was unfair for families out of work to receive more than families in work. It was not just a parliamentary majority of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats who agreed with that; regular polling has found that 77% of the population do, too.

I am delighted to draw attention to a new report by Policy in Practice, “Low Income Londoners and Welfare Reform”, which has examined the effect of the welfare cap on 600,000 low-income people in London. It shows that there has been a positive impact on employment outcomes for those families and no measurable impact on homelessness in comparison with a control group of similar households. The welfare cap is working in London, and the most serious piece of analysis so far conducted upholds that. It is a good example of how adjusting the welfare system carefully can create work incentives to help people to make positive choices to improve their lives and those of their families.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire mentioned the four-year benefit freeze. I acknowledge that inflation is now higher than it was when the freeze was set. I also acknowledge that it is now falling. As my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) pointed out, the value of benefits increased by 21% between 2008 and the 2016 Act, while the value of wages increased by only 11%. The freeze is therefore not quite as stark a corrective as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire makes out.

On the two-child limit in universal credit, it is only right that we have a welfare system in which people who are out of work have to make similar decisions to people in work. However, it is extremely important that people in the welfare system understand the potential consequences. I have become concerned that there may be people who are thinking of having a third child but are not aware that they will not be entitled to further benefits under universal credit. The system cannot work as intended if people are not aware of how it works.

Neil Gray: The hon. Member seems to have a basic misunderstanding of the impact of this measure. Does he not appreciate that many people start planning their families from a very different perspective from where they end up? We cannot continue to punish people who have fallen on hard times, as he is suggesting should happen.

Alex Burghart: I think the word “punish” is entirely wrong in this context. I think we have to say that if people are aware of the consequences of their actions—that there are benefits available for certain decisions they make but not for others—they can make their own decisions. It is up to the state to decide where the balance of benefit lies.

Dr Whitford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Burghart: I will happily give way to the hon. Lady.

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. I am conscious of time. At least two other Members wish to speak. They will not be able to speak if there are any more interventions

[*Mike Gapes (in the Chair)*]

and if the hon. Gentleman does not conclude his remarks soon. I intend to start calling the Front-Bench spokespeople at 10.30 am.

Dr Whitford: Thank you, Mr Gapes. I intervened merely to point out that people's circumstances change, so if they end up redundant, ill, or whatever, and then apply for benefits and have three or more children from better times, they will not receive that support.

Alex Burghart: No, but they will have additional support to get back into work and they will have the benefit of universal credit to progress in work when they do.

I will go back very quickly to the Scottish perspective, because something that is obviously completely unacceptable in the position of the Scottish National party is that they want to fix the problem but they do not want to do it themselves. I find that very peculiar from a party that seeks independence, because of course if Scotland was independent the only way that it could get rid of the freeze would be by paying for it out of Scottish coffers, which would require an increase in tax, and that is something they have declined to do.

I was very surprised when I questioned Jeane Freeman, the Scottish Minister for Social Security, about this issue in a Select Committee. She failed to answer the challenge, just as SNP Members have done today. The SNP can raise taxes now to pay for this, but it chooses not to. It has therefore decided not to prioritise this policy.

Obviously there are always steps we can take to improve the welfare system. Universal credit, which is coming online, will help people to overcome major barriers to employment. It will help people overcome addiction or mental health problems and move back into work. On disability, we have an admirable aim to halve the disability employment gap, and I believe that assistive technology will help us do that. I would like to see us increase work incentives by adjusting the taper as and when the budget allows.

10.22 am

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I want to allow time for my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) to speak, so I will be extraordinarily brief. I hope that, following this very good debate that my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) has secured, we will get the answers to some questions.

One question that I would like the Minister to answer today relates to something that would cost virtually nothing to implement. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire for raising the issue when she said that we judge society on how it treats its most vulnerable. She raised the issue of people who are terminally ill having to go for reassessments. Will the Minister say today that the Government will deal with that and remove that requirement? It is unnecessary and cruel.

Two years on from the introduction of the 2016 Act, the UK Government must end their obsession with their punitive policies in the name of austerity. The backdrop for people in their own houses is absolutely

horrendous, in terms of their struggling on benefits. The average household has lost £7.74 per week because of higher prices for goods. These are real things—bread, milk, cheese. Meat prices are up 3.9%; vegetable prices are up 5.7%; and coffee, tea and cocoa prices are up 8.5%. When someone has very little money, these things have a dramatic impact on their household budget.

The continued freeze of benefits, in the context of sky-high consumer prices index figures at 3%, is trapping thousands of families and children in poverty, and all they have to look forward to at the moment, in terms of this benefit cap, is that financial noose tightening year after year.

I came to Westminster Hall today to speak about the effects on my constituency, where since 2013 we have seen the roll-out of universal credit and the direct impact on people. However, I also wanted to speak about Scotland. I find it absolutely bizarre that none of those Scots Tory MPs or Scots Labour MPs who were so exercised on the issue of the welfare situation in Scotland is here today. Where are they? They are nowhere to be seen. Once again, it is going to be left to the Scottish National party to fight the corner for people in Scotland.

Government Members have said that things are not happening in Scotland. If I had the time—I will have to sit down at the end of this sentence—I would read the list that I have prepared of actions that the Scottish Government are putting in place today, through Jeane Freeman, our Minister.

10.25 am

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you very much for fitting me in, Mr Gapes. I have pulled myself out of my sickbed to be here today, partly because the Minister who is here today is one who I have not yet challenged on the two-child limit and the rape clause; he deserves a fair go on those things as well, as a new Minister.

Earlier, Members mentioned the sort of false premise that people on benefits should face the same choices as those supporting themselves through work. However, that completely fails to recognise that 70% of families on tax credits are working and that the cuts that have been made are making them poorer and putting them into poverty, even though they are in work. They just cannot earn enough to make ends meet, and that is absolutely despicable. They are trapped and they cannot do anything about it, and it is driving children into poverty. The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that 10% more children will go into poverty as a result of the two-child limit alone, which is absolutely despicable.

Through my own constituency work, I have found that the two-child limit has also had an adverse impact on the uptake of Healthy Start, because that entitlement is claimed through the child tax credit system and third children are not getting it. Food is literally being taken out of the mouths of children because of this Government's incompetent policy.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission report that was published last week has evidenced properly that the two-child limit is having a disproportionate effect on those from ethnic minorities, which the Government have failed to acknowledge all the way down the line with this measure. Three quarters of

Pakistani families are losing out as a result of the changes and the two-child limit. Bangladeshi families will lose out by around £2,150, and Pakistani families will lose out by £1,900. That is absolutely unacceptable.

I will talk today particularly about the rape clause, because it is an issue that I have been campaigning on since 2015. We all know that the Government are embarrassed by this policy, because they have refused scrutiny of it on every single occasion. They were forced into having a consultation on it. People submitted their responses to the consultation, stating how unacceptable the policy is, and because the Government knew that and knew that they could not avoid it, they snuck out the results on the day of Trump's inauguration, because they knew that the eyes of the world would be elsewhere. They are thoroughly embarrassed by this policy and they have not accounted for it. They have ducked scrutiny of it on every single occasion.

The Government have also failed to acknowledge the particular situation for women in Northern Ireland, because if women in Northern Ireland make a claim under the non-consensual sex exemption—or the rape clause, as I prefer to call it, because that is what it is—they face being criminalised under the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 if they even make a claim. That is evidenced in the form they have to fill in, which states:

“Please be aware, that in Northern Ireland, if the third party knows or believes that a relevant offence (such as rape) has been committed, the third party”—

the person who verifies the claim—

“will normally have a duty to inform the police of any information that is likely to secure, or to be of material assistance in securing, the apprehension, prosecution or conviction of someone for that offence”.

No woman in Northern Ireland wants to put herself through that; it is absolutely appalling and the Government have failed on every occasion to account for it.

It is unacceptable that women have to fill in a form that states:

“I believe the non-consensual conception exception applies to my child”,

and that they have to fill in their child's name on a form to say that that child was born as the result of rape. The Minister should be thoroughly embarrassed about this.

I have cross-party support against this policy, as well as support from the Scottish Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nurses, and a whole wholen of women's groups, charities and trade unions. The Government still have time to do something about this policy. It has gone to judicial review. If the judicial review finds in favour of the people who have brought it, will the Government accept that? Will the Government not appeal it, because I think they are embarrassed and they should do something about it?

10.29 am

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) on securing this debate and her magnificent speech, which set out perfectly the issues before us. I also thank Emily Cunningham from the SNP research office. She has helped to drive this week

of campaigning on the pernicious Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. I also thank our press office, led by Catriona Matheson, which has helped to highlight our campaign.

This is rather pertinent to some of the issues being discussed this morning, but today is World Down Syndrome Day. They are out of sight, but I am wearing colourful odd socks to help celebrate difference, and I hope others are, too.

I remember well the great frustration and anger—some of that has been brought back to me by some Conservative contributions today—I felt when speaking at the various stages of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill. I remember the anger I felt when we put across the evidence from the expert charities and those arguments were ignored. I remember the meticulousness with which the former Member for Banff and Buchan, Dr Eilidh Whiteford, dismantled the Government's basis for introducing the Bill and the erudite way she evidenced what the impact would be.

We warned then that the four-year freeze to social security would mean a rise in child poverty, but we were ignored; the Government marched on. We warned then that cutting disability employment support would hurt those who need the support most, but we were ignored; the Government marched on. We warned then that introducing a two-child limit to tax credits would push low-income families on the edge into poverty, but we were ignored; the Government marched on. We warned that lowering the benefit cap would arbitrarily hit low-income families, women and children the hardest, but we were ignored; the Government marched on. Sadly, on all those areas the Government knew what was coming. It was not just the SNP telling them; all the expert charities lobbied hard against the Bill, but they were ignored, too.

Two years on, we can start to see the impact of the arbitrary, austerity-driven cuts to the DWP that have forced arbitrary austerity-driven cuts to social security. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire covered that well. She also gave a very good, if sad and desperate, history lesson on the cuts from 2010. In addition to the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, cuts have hammered the incomes of the sick, the disabled and those living on low incomes. She also gave constituency examples of people who have been affected by this Government's policies and said there was no cumulative impact assessment of the Government's cuts to various elements of social security.

The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) did not have time to talk about the correlation between this Tory Government's cuts and increased food bank use, including at St Stephen's church in her constituency—that was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden)—but I do. The Trussell Trust has highlighted a clear correlation between cuts or delays to benefits, low incomes and those using its food banks. Mary Anne MacLeod's report, “Making the Connections: A study of emergency food aid in Scotland”, made the very same connections. I encourage the hon. Member for Redditch to read those reports before coming to another debate like this.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East made another good speech based on his lived experience and what he sees in his constituency. The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) said he appreciated

[Neil Gray]

the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire, but did not agree with much of it. My hon. Friend quoted many facts, so the hon. Gentleman can disagree on policy,

“But facts are chieftains that winna ding”.

The facts show clearly how low-income families, children, women, the sick and disabled are paying the price of this Government's cuts. At the end of his speech, he made a number of inaccurate statements not only about the social security system we are building in Scotland, but his Government's policies. The UK Government sadly no longer wish to halve the disability employment gap. That policy was removed in the manifesto he stood on.

Alex Burghart: I am looking to the Minister for confirmation, but I believe it is still very much our policy to halve the disability employment gap.

Neil Gray: I am looking to the Minister to intervene, but he is looking down at his notes sheepishly. As of the Conservative party's last manifesto, it is clearly no longer an aspiration to halve the disability gap; it merely wishes to reduce it. Rather embarrassingly for the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar, that commitment was removed at the time of the last election.

My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) focused on universal credit, as he has done so diligently for years. He also called out the empty Tory and Labour Benches. That is most stark when compared with the debate last night, when Scots Tories and Scots Labour MPs teamed up to try—they failed—to attack the Scottish Government's policies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has been a diligent and award-winning campaigner on the two-child policy and the rape clause. Perhaps this Minister will be the one who finally listens on that pernicious policy.

We know that in Scotland things could have been much worse had it not been for the Scottish Government's intervention and early action. We have already stopped anyone paying the bedroom tax, and we have ensured the continuation of council tax benefit, which has been stopped by the UK Government in England. The Social Security (Scotland) Bill has just completed its Committee stage. With that, we have seen some of the actions we will take to help build a new and fairer social security system with the limited powers at our disposal in Scotland. We will develop a new benefit to overcome the removal by this Government of housing benefit for most 18 to 21-year-olds. We will make assessments fairer, with no private companies involved and a reduced need for face-to-face assessments. We will set up an independent scrutiny body to ensure that this Scottish Government and future Scottish Governments adhere to human rights and scrutinise social security actions.

More will come out on what we have planned in the areas we control, but it will be a stark departure from the UK Government's approach to social security. Sadly we cannot clear up all the mess that the UK Government have left for Scotland, and that is why we want social security devolved to Holyrood in its entirety. Until that

happens we will keep fighting from Westminster for fairness for people across the UK who need that safety net.

This has been a perfectly timed debate brought to the Chamber by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire. It has highlighted the desperate need for the Government to revisit their punitive and indiscriminate social security cuts. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 led to international condemnation of the UK Government, led by the UN committee on the rights of persons with disabilities, which highlighted grave and systematic violations of the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. The Government have lost court battles on their social security cuts, and just today the National Audit Office said that the DWP has underpaid an estimated 70,000 people on employment and support allowance by an average of £5,000 a person. That is yet more evidence of how this Government are letting people with disabilities and long-term health conditions down. It is time they acted. It is time they helped low-income families. It is time they properly supported people with disabilities. It is time they looked again at the Welfare Reform and Work Act. If the Prime Minister is still serious about tackling burning injustices, this is the place to start.

10.37 am

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) on her measured and comprehensive speech and her focus on the devastating impact of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 on sick and disabled people and the importance of the work done by carers.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) made some extraordinary claims about the track record of the SNP in Scotland, which voted against Labour's measure that would have lifted thousands of children out of poverty in Scotland.

Drew Hendry *rose*—

Neil Gray *rose*—

Margaret Greenwood: I will not give way, because I am short of time. I refer the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey and others to the excellent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) that showed clearly and in detail how Labour has led the fight for a social security system that supports people in their time of need.

Hon. Members: Where is he?

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. We can do without the heckling.

Margaret Greenwood: The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 is having a profound impact on the lives of many of the most vulnerable in our society—the disabled, single parents, pensioners and children growing up in poverty—through a range of policies, accompanied by severe reductions in social security introduced in the 2015 Budget and what we are seeing with the roll-out of universal credit. There is the cut to employment and

support allowance for disabled people, which is falling by £30 a week to the same level as JSA, leaving them with just more than £70 a week. There is the abolition of the family element of child tax credit and the equivalent in universal credit, which is worth up to £540 a year for new claimants.

We have a cut in the level of the benefit cap; the four-year benefits freeze; the abolition of targets to tackle child poverty, which Labour had introduced; the two-child limit on new claims for child tax credit and the child element of universal credit; the change in support for mortgage interest from a benefit to a loan that will be particularly hard on pensioners and disabled people; and the cuts to work allowances in universal credit in the summer Budget of 2015, which we call on the Government to reverse. So we see that the claims that the Act rewards hard work and is fair to working households simply do not bear scrutiny.

Neil Gray: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Margaret Greenwood: No, I am going to make some progress.

In-work poverty has risen to record levels: 8 million people, including 2.7 million children, are in poverty, despite being in a working family, and 67% of working-age adults and children in poverty in the UK are in working households. Many people are stuck in a low pay, no pay cycle, where they may pass from employed to unemployed and back again several times in the course of a year.

A study of in-work poverty published by researchers at Cardiff University found that

“those in working poverty are three times more likely to become workless than people living in non-poor working households.”

It also found that not everyone who finds work progresses to better paid employment. The reports states that

“one quarter of those families where somebody finds work, exit worklessness only to enter in-work poverty. Lone parents are over-represented in this group, as are families with three or more children.”

I recommend the report to the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean).

The cumulative impact assessment by the Equality and Human Rights Commission published last week, which several Members have rightly referenced, states that the measure that has the most impact on households on low income is the four-year benefits freeze introduced in April 2016. When the benefits freeze began in April 2016, inflation was 0.3%. Despite a fall in inflation last month, it is still at 2.7%, and food prices went up by well over 3% in February compared with the year before. So it is little wonder that the chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority has warned of increasing household debt built up simply by trying to cover basic household bills.

The Resolution Foundation estimates that by 2019 a lone parent in work with one child will lose £420 a year as a direct result of the freeze alone, and a couple with a single earner and two children will lose £570 a year. If the Chancellor was justified in his claims in his spring statement for improvements in the public finances, will the Government abandon the benefits freeze that is pushing households into poverty?

Housing benefit was first cut in 2011 and is also one of the benefits now frozen by the Act, but private sector rents have continued to rise rapidly. Between 2011 and 2018,

private rents in the UK increased by more than 15%—and by more than 12% even if London is excluded. The Act also severely cut the levels of the benefit cap so that it is now hitting the whole of the country, and the cap in practice operates through a cut in housing benefit. The benefit cap is supposedly designed to incentivise work by exempting people who start claiming working tax credits. However, 45,000 households that had their housing benefit capped in November 2017 were single-parent families, and 35,000—

Neil Gray: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Margaret Greenwood: No, I am really short of time.

Thirty-five thousand of the single-parent capped households had at least one child aged under five, including 15,000 with a child aged under two.

The Act also requires the main carer of a child to look for work once their youngest child turns three, rather than five as previously. Many parents of very young children would actually like to work, but it can be almost impossible for them to find affordable childcare or work that fits around caring for young children. That brings me to one of the most contentious parts of the Act: the abolition of the targets to tackle child poverty set by the previous Labour Government in the Child Poverty Act 2010.

The previous Labour Government lifted 1.1 million children out of poverty through a cross-Government strategy that included Sure Start centres and year-on-year increases in social security, which went hand in hand with employment support targeted at specific groups such as lone parents. There was no thought that people should be left trapped on welfare, as the then Work and Pensions Secretary termed it when the Welfare Reform and Work Bill was being debated.

Labour's policies achieved results. Between 1997 and 2010, the employment rate for lone parents with dependent children in the UK increased from 45% to 57%. That cross-Government approach has long since been discarded by the Government. The Child Poverty Unit set up to oversee it has been dismantled, and renaming the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission “the Social Mobility Commission” in the Act, thus excluding child poverty, says much about the purpose of that Act.

All four members of the board of the Social Mobility Commission stood down in December in protest at the lack of progress in creating a fairer Britain, including Baroness Shephard, deputy chair of the commission and a former Conservative Education Secretary under John Major. Will the Minister tell us his Department's assessment of what contribution the Act has made to social mobility?

In February, the End Child Poverty coalition published new figures that showed that more than 50% of children in some constituencies are growing up in poverty and that 4 million children are in poverty after housing costs are taken into account. The Government claim their figures show that child poverty is actually decreasing, but they do not have up-to-date figures. The End Child Poverty coalition figures compiled by Loughborough University are for 2017-18, yet the Government's official figures, to be published tomorrow, will cover only the year before, 2016-17. That time lag is important because, although the benefits freeze came into effect in April 2016,

[Margaret Greenwood]

other parts of the Act that are likely to lead to an increase in child poverty, such as the two-child policy, were introduced only in April 2017, and so we have yet to see the full impact of them.

Neil Gray: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Margaret Greenwood: No.

The main provider of food banks in the UK, the Trussell Trust, has highlighted that food bank referrals have risen by 30% in areas after the full service has been introduced. The EHRC report published last week estimated that 1.5 million children will be living in poverty by 2021-22 as a result of tax and benefit changes, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies predicted in November that the proportion of children growing up in poverty is expected to rise from 30% in 2015-16 to 37% in 2021-2022. It really is time the Government listened to the informed opinion that is available out there.

The two-child limit on new claims for child tax credit and the child element in universal credit is one of the most controversial and, to my mind, one of the most offensive parts of the Act. The idea behind it seems to be that people claiming social security should have to think twice before having larger families, but in the real world unplanned pregnancies happen to people, and people might be unexpectedly made redundant having planned a larger family. Moreover, we should value children and not see them as a burden.

Faith communities are especially concerned about the two-child policy because, for many people of faith, reproduction, use of contraception and family size are determined by beliefs. The policy would originally have also covered children born as a result of rape. The Government were forced to back down, but the exemption still requires a woman to disclose sexual violence, which we know many women understandably find extremely difficult because of, for example, the trauma that they have experienced, a need to protect themselves and perhaps their children, and a fear of the perpetrator.

Someone claiming the exemption must also not be living with the person responsible for the sexual violence. Again, we know that women can be at severe risk at the point when they leave an abusive relationship. It should be the woman who has suffered abuse who decides when that should be. She should not be pushed into doing so at the wrong time by the DWP. The Government have not told us how many people have been affected by the two-child policy or how many have claimed exemptions, even though the policy has been in operation for almost a year now. Will the Government publish those figures and abolish the rape clause, which requires women who want to claim the exemption to prove that they have been a victim of sexual violence? Will the Government abandon the disgraceful policy that treats one child as though they were somehow worth less than another?

In a little over a fortnight, support for mortgage interest will be turned from a benefit into a loan. The Government have left it so late to contact people claiming SMI that at the beginning of March more than half of claimants—53,500 out of 110,000—had still not received a follow-up phone call to the initial letter sent out by the DWP. The delay echoes the fiasco of the pension changes

affecting women born in the 1950s, where again people were not given enough time to prepare. Forty-one per cent. of people claiming SMI are pensioners. Turning it into a loan risks pushing them into poverty.

Neil Gray *rose*—

Margaret Greenwood: The Government have made it difficult to trace the overall impact of the Act with all its complexity because they have failed to publish a cumulative impact assessment.

Neil Gray *rose*—

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. It is quite clear that the hon. Lady is not giving way. She is coming to the end of her remarks, so I will be grateful if people do not try to intervene when it has been made clear that she is not giving way.

Margaret Greenwood: Even the impact assessments for each part of the Act are out of date. Civil society organisations such as the IFS, the Resolution Foundation and the Equality and Human Rights Commission have done the hard work and the evidence is damning. If the Government do not like the figures that other organisations publish, they should make sure they publish their own and that they are up to date. The Act uses language such as fairness to working households, a sustainable welfare system and life chances, but it is punitive, not progressive. The groups hit time and again by the Act are those most at risk of poverty: lone parents, larger families and disabled people.

10.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): It is a great pleasure to be in your capable hands this morning, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) for securing the debate, and all Members who have participated this morning and continue to take an interest in the issues of welfare reform and work.

When the Welfare Reform and Work Act was first debated, in the summer of 2015, Ministers spoke of three principles that underpinned the legislation: first, work is the best route out of poverty, enabling people to take control of their lives and achieve their full potential; secondly, spending on welfare should be sustainable and fair to the taxpayer, while protecting the most vulnerable; and thirdly, people who receive benefits should face the same life choices as those who do not get the same support from the state. We remain committed to those three principles. Indeed, in the two years that have passed since the legislation became law, we have been putting them into practice.

Many of the measures in the Welfare Reform and Work Act that hon. Members across the Chamber have highlighted this morning form part of a package of policies through which we have been increasing incentives and support for people to find work, stay in work, build a career and progress.

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Kit Malthouse: Not at the moment.

With the national living wage we have been helping people to earn more. From April 2018 the Government will raise the national living wage by 4.4% to £7.83 an hour. At that point, the annual earnings of a full-time minimum wage worker will have increased by more than £2,000 a year since we introduced the national living wage in April 2016. Since April 2015, the lowest paid have seen their wages grow by almost 7% above inflation.

With increases to the income tax personal allowance, we have been helping people to keep more of what they earn. Next month we will raise the personal allowance in line with inflation to £11,850. A typical basic rate taxpayer will pay £1,075 less income tax in 2018-19 than they did in 2010-11. Compared with 2015-16, there are now 1.2 million people who, as a result of our changes to the personal allowance, will no longer have to pay any income tax at all.

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Kit Malthouse: I am not going to give way, because I want to address some of the specific questions, and give the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire a chance to respond.

With universal credit, as my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) touched on during the debate, we are providing claimants with a simpler system that ensures that work always pays. It offers families more generous childcare, and gives parents access to tailored support from personal work coaches to find, and then progress in, work. Three separate research studies have shown that universal credit is having a positive impact on employment outcomes. Compared with jobseeker's allowance, our evidence shows that people on universal credit are 4% more likely to be in work after six months, put more effort into finding work, apply for more jobs, and do more to increase their hours and earnings. Universal credit is being introduced in a careful and co-ordinated way, allowing us to make improvements along the way. We are listening to the concerns of our stakeholders and making changes where necessary.

The topic for today's debate invited us all to reflect on what impact this Government's policies are having. As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire rose to give her opening speech, the Office for National Statistics published its latest release on the state of the labour market in the UK. That release presents a striking picture, with 32.25 million people in employment as of this morning—a record high. The employment rate for women stands at 70.9%, which is also a record high. Unemployment is down to the joint lowest level since 1975, and 876,000 vacancies are open to people in search of employment, which is also close to a record high.¹

The figures are particularly significant when it comes to children—many hon. Members have spoken about children today. The evidence is clear: children living in households where no one is in work are five times more likely to be in poverty than those where all adults work. The chances of a child being in poverty where one parent works full-time and the other part-time is one in 20.

In 2014-15, 75% of children in families where no one is in work failed to reach the expected standard at GCSE compared with 39% for all working families, and 52% for low-income working families. We are supporting

parents to find and stay in work with record spending on childcare, which will reach £6 billion in 2019-20. In England, working parents of three and four-year-olds can now get 30 hours of free childcare a week, saving those using the full 30 hours around £5,000 per year in total.

Neil Gray rose—

Kit Malthouse: We are making good progress. Nationally, there are now about 880,000 fewer households where no one is in work, and around 600,000 fewer children living in such households compared with 2010. The number of children living in absolute poverty on a before-housing-costs basis is down 200,000 since 2010, and the UK is now the highest spending of all OECD countries as a percentage of GDP on family benefits, standing at 3.5% against an average across the OECD of 2%.

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. Mr Gray, the Minister has made it clear that he is not giving way. He does not have to give way, so I would be grateful if you would allow him to carry on.

Kit Malthouse: I have lots to get through. I want the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire to reply, and the Scottish National party has had a lot to say today.

The hon. Lady majored fairly heavily on disability benefits in her speech. We are committed to ensuring that more of the money goes to the people who need it most. We have continued to increase benefits for people with disabilities and health conditions, and we will spend £800 million extra in 2018-19 to do that once again. For people in the employment and support allowance support group, that means £720 more per year than in 2010. For recipients of the monthly rate of disability living allowance, paid to the most disabled children, it is more than £1,200 a year more.

At the same time, we are determined to break down the barriers to employment faced by disabled people. The hon. Lady spoke about the removal of the work-related activity component under ESA. The old system, as we all remember, was failing to help disabled people and those with health conditions into work. Only one in 100 ESA work-related activity group claimants leave the benefit each month. We believe that disabled people and people with health conditions deserve better than that.

We believe that the changes, working in tandem with a £330 million support package over the next four years, will provide the right incentives and support to help new claimants with limited capability for work. Taken as a whole, our policies to help people with disabilities to find employment have been making good progress. More than half a million more disabled people are now in work than four years ago, and on a before-housing-costs basis the absolute poverty rate among people living in a family where somebody is disabled is now down to a record low.

On the underpayment of ESA, the hon. Lady asked about paying back further than 2014. We are actually legally restricted from recalculating payments back beyond 2014. Statute governs that position, which we are not allowed to exceed. The hon. Lady also raised the success rate of personal independence payment claimants who

1. [Official Report, 28 March 2018, Vol. 638, c. 4MC.]

[Kit Malthouse]

go through the appeals process. It is worth remembering that the vast majority of PIP decisions do not go to appeal. Some 2.9 million PIP claims were decided on between April 2013 and September 2017, of which only 8% of initial PIP decisions were appealed against, and only 4% were overturned at appeal. A decision being overturned does not necessarily mean that the original decision was incorrect; often it is because the claimant has provided more cogent oral evidence or other new evidence that has allowed a more accurate assessment.

In a forensic speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) dissected the case against welfare reform very ably. In particular, he pointed towards the benefits cap, which a number of Members have criticised. Of course, the numbers show that the benefits cap has been extraordinarily successful as an incentive to get into work. Over the last couple of years, tens of thousands of people have come out from under the benefits cap, because of course it does not apply once someone moves into work. The amount at which they are capped has dropped significantly too.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch asked about older claimants and when an impact assessment was likely to be approved. I am informed that we will publish the evaluation of the two Jobcentre Plus interventions for older claimants in the spring of 2018—I assume before the summer recess. Those will look at the impacts of sector-based work, academy and work experience interventions.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) raised the issue of reassessments for those who are terminally ill. He will know that in both PIP and ESA we have a fast-track process for any claimants who have fewer than six months to live. In ESA we introduced a severe conditions criteria last autumn, which means that people with the most severe degenerative conditions will not need to be reassessed. It is more complex in the case of disease, but if those individuals qualify for the highest level of ESA under the support group, and there is no possibility of

improvement, they do not need to return for reassessment. I am more than happy to keep that under review and have another look at it in future.

Finally, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) raised the rape clause, which is an issue on which she has campaigned. Obviously, it is a very difficult and sensitive issue, which we are more than happy to keep under review. As she knows, a third-party model has been put in place, but if particular issues are being experienced by women accessing that model, I am more than happy to look at it again. As she also knows, there are particular circumstances in Northern Ireland. My undertaking to her this morning is that I am happy to meet her, if she wishes to discuss it with me, to try to find a way through this issue.

It has been an interesting debate, although it has put the House into two polar opposite groups: those who thought that welfare reform was required, and those who did not. One of the things that I have found most disheartening about such debates since I was appointed to my job is the implicit defence by those who are opposed to welfare reform of an old benefits system that was frankly fraudulent. It was trapping people in poverty, and insisting that it was trying to help them when, in fact, it was holding them back.

We believe in treating everybody with dignity, and giving them the power to take control of their lives and find their own way forward, for them and their families, in work. We believe in giving them all the tools that we can to do that, whether they are disabled, single parents, families, or older people who wish to access work. The way to a dignified future for everybody is to give them control, not to make them vassals of a welfare state.

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Dr Whitford, you have five seconds to wind up.

10.59 am

Dr Whitford: We did not defend the old system. If work is to pay, the Government should look at children in working households in poverty.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Children's Playgrounds

11 am

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of children's playgrounds.

Looking at the weather outside, I am sure hon. Members will have noticed that spring has now arrived, or is at least a little closer. Parents across the country are now hoping that they can finally get their children outdoors to run around and go to parks with friends, and to burn off some energy on the weekends and in the fantastic lighter evenings, in their local playgrounds, which is the topic of this debate. I am very grateful to have the opportunity to talk about this subject today.

Times are quite tough, as we know, and resources are squeezed. I want to raise in the debate today the pressures on the availability of local outdoor spaces and playground areas, which are declining at an alarming rate.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): On that point, I want to raise the issue of the playground near Strand Street School in the East Marsh area of my constituency. It has fallen into significant disrepair, and a group of local mums, the East Marsh mums, is now pulling together and trying to raise the funds to establish a brand new playground. Seeking those funds is incredibly difficult; they are looking to lots of different community funding pots to try to raise that money. It will take a significant amount of money. Does my hon. Friend agree that the loss of the playground is an enormous loss to the children of the East Marsh area?

Mr Leslie: Yes. I know that my hon. Friend is a real campaigner for grassroots neighbourhood issues, and she will know the programme in question more than I do. I will come on to talk about what parents can do when faced with the retreat of the traditions of municipal provision, when they have little choice but to somehow find a voluntary alternative. It is very difficult and resources are quite scarce.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Parks are not just important for allowing children to let off steam. They also play a vital role in combating loneliness. Is the hon. Gentleman going to comment on that?

Mr Leslie: Indeed I am. One of the great things that we are all very nostalgic about from our own childhoods is communal open spaces, and facilities that are largely taken for granted and rarely discussed. Not just children gain enormously from the opportunity for outdoor exercise and socialisation; new parents get to meet other parents, and playgrounds help reduce isolation. They build new friendship networks for new mums and dads. It is a great watering hole for people to come together, meet and form new bonds in the community, particularly at a big life-changing moment.

Playgrounds are a great British tradition, mostly developed in the 20th century. This year marks the 100th anniversary of Charles Wicksteed's playground equipment company near Kettering. When I mentioned to my eight-year-old daughter that I was leading this debate today, she encouraged me to call for more bars, because she is such a gymnastics enthusiastic who would go round and round on them all day long if she could,

but playgrounds are also about sandboxes, swings, slides, climbing frames and roundabouts, and there are many other fantastic municipal facilities with even more exciting innovations—trampolines, paddling pools and all sorts of fantastic amenities.

Melanie Onn: Will my hon. Friend congratulate North East Lincolnshire's Labour council on introducing a parkour facility at the Duke of York playground area, which introduced playgrounds to a whole new generation of young people? Unfortunately, we have seen that falling into disrepair, even though it was brought in only about four years ago. It was a really exciting initiative and my ten-year-old son absolutely loves playing there.

Mr Leslie: There are different fashions and trends in play, particularly in the younger teenage years. Skateboard parks were a particular thing a decade ago and trends change. In Nottingham, in my constituency, a new play area has just been installed in Shipstone Street, and Nottingham is trying its best to roll out more facilities. It has improved 75 play areas, with three more set for improvement works shortly, and the city has 54 Green Flag Awards, the greatest number in the country.

Resources are still an underlying problem. Since 2009, Nottingham has had to cut its parks and open spaces budget by £3 million, with a further £300,000 to be cut in the next financial year. Like a lot of local authorities, it has had to start looking elsewhere to plug that gap, looking for grants from other charities and funding bodies over the past 10 years. That is a story repeated across the country. For example, Knowsley Borough Council has had to make a decision to sell off some parks and green spaces, which is a real shame, as childhood obesity levels are very high in that part of the world. Other local authorities are being forced into similar choices—half of the councils in north-west England, according to a BBC report, are considering selling off parks or finding other organisations to maintain them over the next three years.

Nationally, we are just not replacing playgrounds at the same rate as they are disappearing. Some 92% of park managers report cuts to their budgets over the last three years, and research undertaken by the Association of Play Industries has uncovered a sharp decline in playgrounds across England: 214 playgrounds have been closed, with a further 234 playgrounds earmarked for closure by local authorities. That is 448 playgrounds closed or closing, which is an alarming downward trend in play provision. There is no longer dedicated funding for playgrounds from central Government, or grants from the third sector, so playground provision falls to local authorities, whose budgets are of course squeezed.

Play really does matter and it is worth underlining what to many of us might seem obvious. Playgrounds are one of the best ways of encouraging children to do physical activity. Childhood obesity is at epidemic levels. More than one fifth of reception children are overweight or obese; by year 6 that rises to over a third. Children living in deprived areas are more than twice as likely to be obese than those in more affluent areas. For many children, playgrounds represent the only chance to play outdoors. Children living within 1 km of a playground are five times more likely to be of a healthy weight than children who are not near a playground.

[Mr Leslie]

Play is fundamental to the wider wellbeing of children. If play is restricted, that is likely to have a profound effect on physical and mental health, now and into the future. There is a crisis in children's mental health, with some reports saying that as many as 20% of children have some degree of mental illness and that problem might be rising. Without adequate access to play, children cannot develop the important emotional skills needed to protect them from anxiety and depression. Research from the charity Fields in Trust shows, for the first time at national level, a direct and statistically significant link between the availability of public parks and green spaces and health and wellbeing.

That is why I called this debate today. We must not take playgrounds and play facilities for granted. We have to talk about them. This is an area of policy that could fall between the gaps. It was difficult even to decide whether I should target this debate at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Education, or the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, so this is not owned as much as it should be.

I have four requests of the Minister, and I will be as specific as I can. The first is about resources. I do not like to bang on about money constantly because I know the situation is tight, but we should invest to save. Investing a pound in good play facilities now will yield better returns and savings for the health service and the education system in the long run. We cannot rely on developers' section 106 contributions for new play facilities. They make a bit of a difference, but only in areas in which development is taking place.

John Howell: On section 106 contributions, has the hon. Gentleman thought about using the powers in the neighbourhood planning regime to designate open and green spaces for that use?

Mr Leslie: I think that is absolutely vital. A lot of local authorities and councillors care about these issues and do exactly that. We gain from having open spaces for free-style play, but having structure in playground provision costs money, and we need to think about investing in such facilities.

If I were to ask for a sum of money from the Department, I would urge the Minister to think about what a mere £100 million could achieve. It would deliver 1,600 playgrounds and play spaces. That is the sort of level we are talking about to counter the downward trend in the statistics I mentioned earlier.

Secondly, children's voices should be better represented as policies are developed. The parks and green spaces sector has not had a dedicated national voice or leadership in Government since the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment was merged with the Design Council back in 2011, and the closure of the charity GreenSpace in 2013 was a great loss. The lack of a dedicated national leadership agency on this issue is holding back the development of children's playgrounds, parks and open spaces. The Department set up the parks action group, but it does not focus specifically on children and the importance of play. I ask the Minister to think about how we can increase the representation of this issue in that forum.

The other day, the Minister and the Secretary of State launched the integrated communities strategy, which relates to how we can help communities to come together. We talked earlier about the social cohesion gains that could come from that. Although the "Integrated Communities Strategy" Green Paper mentioned bringing neighbourhoods together, it could have focused much more on play. I ask the Minister for parks to think about adding play to his portfolio to address the real threats that exists. Taking action to open up the mental and physical health benefits of outdoor play to the widest possible range of children from all backgrounds will make a real difference.

Thirdly, I ask the Minister to help us get more allies for the play sector. That is similar to my second ask of the Government. The Heritage Lottery Fund recently removed its "Parks for People" programme. It is one of the greatest ironies that, after the financial crisis, the lottery provided some of the most stable funding for community development, and we have relied on it for the past decade. That was the only dedicated parks restoration fund, and without it there is less opportunity to bid for grants.

Fourthly, I want to ask the Minister about the evidence and research he will need to arm him in his discussions with the rest of Government, with his Secretary of State and around the Cabinet table. We need to prove that every pound spent on children's playgrounds will lead to great returns. Next month, the charity Fields in Trust will publish a report that shows that the value that lower socioeconomic groups place on parks and green spaces is higher than the national average. A reduction in the quantity and quality of those spaces may disproportionately affect those who need them most. This is not just about money. We need to gather that evidence together. The alarming statistics in the Association of Play Industries' report, which I mentioned earlier, combined with the continued increase in child obesity, lead me to ask whether we can commission a deeper and more thorough report into the state of play facilities and open spaces across the entire United Kingdom. Research with a particular emphasis on the prevalence of obesity and other health issues in certain geographical areas will allow us to examine the correlations and help us to make more appropriate decisions about play policy.

I believe there is a strong correlation between higher instances of obesity and mental health issues in childhood, and the deprivation experienced by areas where free-play opportunities are limited or lacking. That is a significant challenge for public policy makers. A well-maintained and loved community play and recreation area fosters social cohesion, as hon. Members said, encourages children to be active and lifts the spirit and mood of the whole community. I hope the Minister agrees and helps to drive forward a renaissance in children's play across the country.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) on securing this important debate. I enjoyed listening to him and thought he made a thoughtful contribution, as did the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell).

The breadth of my portfolio at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government means that I have the privilege of discussing a wide range of areas that affect people's daily lives. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Nottingham East for raising the important issue of playgrounds. He spoke passionately about how such areas bring communities together and promote health, fitness and an appreciation of the outdoors. Like him, I am a father—I have two daughters—and I enjoy sports, so I recognise the value of having safe, welcoming, open public spaces.

Ensuring that playgrounds, parks and other open spaces are available and accessible is, in the first instance, the responsibility of individual local authorities, as the hon. Gentleman recognises. I want to say a few words about how my Department is supporting the sector in that area. I will touch on resources, which he rightly talked about, so I hope that will be of interest to him, and then I will draw on the work that is being done across Government. As he acknowledged, other Departments have a stake in this. I will bring their good work to the fore today.

On the issue of resources for local government, I would be the first to say that local authorities have done a commendable job over the past few years in delivering high-quality services, including adult social care and children's services, and improving our roads, public spaces and playgrounds, in what has no doubt been a difficult financial climate. They should be commended for that.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) on securing this really worthwhile debate. Will the Minister join me in commending South Gloucestershire Council, which announced in the past couple of weeks that it will invest £460,000 in green spaces, including a number of parks and playgrounds around Yate and Chipping Sodbury, which will make a huge difference to the community? I want to put on the record my thanks to two local campaigners, Sonia Williams and Matt Lewis, who have constantly raised the issue.

Rishi Sunak: I would be delighted to congratulate my hon. Friend's council. That is an example of communities working with their local authority, despite the difficult overall climate, to find creative solutions that will benefit the community. There are examples of that happening all over the country. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that example, and I congratulate all those involved in that positive outcome.

On resources for the sector overall, the recent local government finance settlement ensures that the sector will have £45.6 billion in the next financial year, rising from £44.3 billion in the financial year we are just finishing. Nottingham will have more than £500 million in core spending power over that spending review period, the last two years of which we are about to enter, and it will be for the council—whether in Nottingham or elsewhere—to decide how best to prioritise its resources among all the competing claims.

The settlement is the third year of a four-year deal, as I mentioned, and it was accepted by 97% of councils, including that of the hon. Member for Nottingham East. I am glad that they have benefited from the certainty and stability brought by knowledge of income

over the medium term. That is something that local authorities have asked for. It allows them to think strategically. Indeed, in the hon. Gentleman's area the Nottingham Open Space Forum, of which I know he is aware, is one such example of that longer term strategic thinking, and it highlights the point that local areas are best placed to decide how to use resources to promote the causes that their constituents care most about.

Melanie Onn: Is the Minister aware of the inquiry by the previous Communities and Local Government Committee, which I was part of? The public response in that inquiry was overwhelming—one of the biggest the Committee received for any inquiry it had undertaken. Is that a sign that parks should be much higher up the Government's agenda?

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Lady for her work on that Committee. I read that report when I first got this job a few weeks ago. It was a very good report, and I hope that she is pleased to see that the Government responded very positively to its recommendations, through my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones). I shall come on to those shortly, especially with regard to the parks action group and how we take forward the work recommended in the report.

The hon. Member for Nottingham East spoke a lot about children's needs, and he is absolutely right to do so. There is more to do on tackling rising obesity levels and mental illness among our young people, but I am pleased that a great deal of activity is going on across Government in this area. We all want our children to be healthy and active, no matter their background, which is why it is important that we focus as a priority on what is happening in schools.

Having spoken to colleagues in the Department for Education, I am delighted to tell the Chamber that funding for the primary school PE and sport premium has doubled to £320 million a year from 2017. That will be a huge help in enabling schools to drive further improvements to sport provision. Furthermore, an extra £100 million has been promised to schools through the healthy pupils capital fund, which is a one-off fund provided from the soft drinks industry levy. That money will go to improving playgrounds and sports facilities across the school estate. Last week the Department for Education also announced the allocation of almost £1.5 billion in the forthcoming financial year to maintain and improve the condition of the education estate, including outdoor spaces.

As the hon. Gentleman noted, however, this is about much more than just funding. By making physical education a compulsory subject at all four key stages in the new national curriculum, the Government are helping to prioritise exercise and wellbeing. The positive experience of sport at a young age can create a lifelong habit of participation. It is important to foster that in young children. It is also important for our children to have role models whom they can look up to and who can inspire them to get fit and keep active. Darcy Bussell has spoken about that recently, and my constituent Sir Ian Botham has been a long-time advocate of children's exercise, health and fitness.

The hon. Gentleman made the important point that there should be a voice for the parks and green spaces sector, a dedicated national voice to champion and

[*Rishi Sunak*]

advocate for it. He is aware of the parks action group established by my predecessor last year, and I would like to think that it is exactly that voice that the hon. Gentleman has called for. One of the points that I will take away from today is that we might need to shout a little louder about the important work of the parks action group. As the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) knows, that is one of the Select Committee recommendations that the Government acted on swiftly.

The action group draws on the expertise of a range of partners from the parks sector and a range of Departments. I will list some of those involved: the Association for Public Service Excellence, the Parks Alliance, Fields in Trust, the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, Keep Britain Tidy, Natural England, Groundwork, the National Trust, the Heritage Lottery Fund and bodies representing local and parish councils. I list them because I am especially pleased that such a wide range of organisations have committed their time and energy to work in partnership with the Government to raise the profile of the parks agenda.

I say to hon. Members present that I do not intend for the parks action group just to be a talking shop. It aims not only to take forward the recommendations of the Communities and Local Government Committee report from last year but to deal with wider issues facing the parks sector. The members represent the views of the local communities with whom they work and, through their contribution, we will ensure that all the issues that have surfaced today and many others are properly raised, represented and actioned.

The group will in the first instance identify effective and deliverable activities that can be undertaken to secure a better future for our green spaces for generations to come. It will focus on six immediate priorities for parks: standards, funding, vision and value of parks, empowering communities, knowledge and skills, and increasing usage. Those priorities pick up a number of the very pertinent points made by the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Leslie: I am very interested to hear about the action group, which is an important organisation, but I must emphasise again play and playgrounds—the need for structured physical facilities within the parks. If the Minister can ensure that that is part and parcel of one of those six objectives, I would feel a lot happier.

Rishi Sunak: I can absolutely give the hon. Gentleman that reassurance. I was about to come on to that, but he is right to raise it. I will ensure that a transcript of the debate, including his particular point about playgrounds and play, is given to all the members of the parks action group so that that is uppermost in their minds as they develop their work.

The action group will also explore how to improve equality of access across all ages and social groups. We all recognise that parks can play an important role in strengthening community cohesion, combating loneliness—my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) made an important point there—and promoting integration between diverse groups. The hon. Member for Nottingham East made reference to the integrated communities strategy published last week, and that highlights how the use of shared areas, especially by young people, helps to bring communities and neighbourhoods together. As a

Department, we will welcome views on the proposals in that Green Paper and we will engage with individuals, communities, businesses and faith groups to help deliver those specific proposals.

With regard to loneliness, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley, I am a member of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, which was set up in memory of Jo. The Prime Minister has championed this as a priority for her—there was a meeting only last week, in which we talked about the value of green spaces in combatting loneliness and about ensuring that open spaces feature heavily in the commission's strategy.

The parks action group will also consider the various funding models that exist to support parks and green spaces, and it will share that information with the sector to support future sustainability. There are examples of innovation, particularly up in Newcastle and the north-east, which I am keen to visit reasonably soon to explore what is being done. I look forward to presenting an update to Parliament on the progress of the parks action group in due course. I encourage all Members to support its work.

Melanie Onn: When is the strategy group due to produce a report? I wonder how the parents of the Sixhills area of Great Grimsby will feel about the outcomes of that and how quickly they will start to see the results in their play area.

Rishi Sunak: The parks action group has met recently, this year, and I am due to attend the next meeting. I cannot give the hon. Lady a specific timeline, but the Government have committed to report regularly to Parliament with updates. I hope we will give an update before the summer recess, but I have not yet had my first meeting so I am loth to make a firm commitment until I know about the work streams and plans of the action group. The Government have funded the group with £500,000, which I hope will leverage in extra funding from the various partners involved to promote the agenda that the group is keen to embrace.

The hon. Member for Nottingham East made another point about social deprivation. He is aware of the pocket parks programme, which the Department has run in the past, where £1 million helped in cases such as the one the hon. Member for Great Grimsby mentioned. The programme helped to fund 87 small green spaces, including two in the constituency of the hon. Member for Nottingham East, such as Frinton pocket park. That was a fantastic programme and I am looking to see what lessons we can learn from it, such as whether there is the possibility of replicating something similar in the future. It was brilliant at targeting money on areas with high social deprivation, removing those barriers to access.

I am conscious of time, but I hope that in the debate I have been able to demonstrate to the Chamber that the Government—not least me—are taking the subject seriously. With the parks action group, work is happening. The hon. Gentleman was absolutely right to put the issues front and forward on the agenda. I look forward to working with him and other Members to develop the green spaces that we all want our children to enjoy, not just today but for years to come.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Future of the Commonwealth

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the Commonwealth.

It is a particular pleasure to hold this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and as a child of the Commonwealth and as the founder chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for the Commonwealth. The fact that so many Members are here—at least on the Government side of the Chamber—is testament to the enduring importance of the Commonwealth. Today is a good day to have this debate, because it is only a few weeks before the first Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting held in this country for 30 years.

Much has been written about the Commonwealth, and it has been written off many times, but we can be confident that a recent article in *The Guardian* entitled “Empire strikes back: why former colonies don’t need Britain after Brexit” was suitably disobliging. A 69-year-old multilateral body that spans all continents and has 54 nations, from the very large to the minute, some 2.4 billion people, great forests of diversity, billions of pounds of intra-trade, a headquarters in a royal palace and a logo that appears to be a globe swallowed up by a hedgehog does not need to worry too much about *The Guardian*. What the Commonwealth needs to do is ensure that it is looking firmly forward, surprising us with its constant reinvention, giving the younger generation responsibility and, above all, looking confidently towards a bigger, better future—one that the American poet Aberjhani called

“reinvigorated substance, a fresh flow of ideas, and splendidly revitalised colour.”

Let me share a few thoughts about what that might look like in practice and what Britain might contribute. I cannot today namecheck the more than 100 Commonwealth organisations based in London, or pay tribute to their individual contributions to this great brand that we all want to see shine ever more brightly, but I can start by welcoming the fact that Prime Minister Modi—he is the Head of Government in India, which is the Commonwealth’s most populous nation—will be at this CHOGM. It is the first time that the Prime Minister of India has been for 13 years. That is important.

In that context, I strongly support the Royal Commonwealth Society’s call for a new visa partnership with India, modelled on what a number of us worked hard to achieve with China only a few years ago. That partnership would recognise that we are such an important investor in and visitor to each other’s countries. Let us build stronger links with India and encourage her to take a bigger leadership role in the Commonwealth. At the same time, let us use our huge development reach through the Department for International Development to realise two big development goals across not only India, but all the nations of the Commonwealth.

First, we should have a vision to increase vision, using the technology of apps and the success there has been, primarily with cataract operations. That concept was brilliantly outlined by Peek Vision during the Commonwealth service in Westminster Abbey, and it

has realised huge success in east Africa and further south, especially in Botswana, whose Minister of Health was there beside our Prime Minister during the service. On that occasion, some Members will have heard the charity’s co-founder explain how the apps that have been developed can be used by teachers to diagnose what an impaired sight or blind person is suffering from and how they can be cured. There are more than 100 million people with bad or no eyesight in the Commonwealth and together, as a unified entity, the Commonwealth can help many of them, if not all, to have better vision.

Secondly, we could affirm the determination to eliminate malaria, not least through the charity Malaria No More. Across our Commonwealth and throughout the continent of Africa, malaria prevents so many people—especially the young—from reaching their potential or even enjoying a life beyond childhood. As someone who had malaria on his wedding day in east Africa, I feel I owe the mosquitos one. I hope that the Secretary of State for International Development and the Minister will say more about Malaria No More.

By combining development funds with national programmes, international charities and the power of giving across so many countries, I believe the two dreams of giving almost everyone in the Commonwealth sight and ridding the Commonwealth—and ultimately the world, but let us start with the Commonwealth—of malaria could be achieved. That would unite the people of the Commonwealth in a shared understanding of what we can achieve together. By eliminating malaria, we can make real advances on an issue that I know the Foreign Secretary cares hugely about and loses few opportunities to advocate: delivering 12 years of education for the 130 million girls in the Commonwealth currently not in school. I hope that the Minister will say more about what we can achieve to ensure that every girl in the Commonwealth gets the chance to go to school.

Nor is what the Commonwealth can achieve limited to change that directly affects humans. We can make the Blue Charter project come alive in islands in the Caribbean and the Indian and Pacific oceans. On land, we can protect more forests through the Queen’s Commonwealth Canopy scheme. I hope that the Commonwealth will commit to that during CHOGM and bring that Blue Charter project alive.

These visions, projects and development causes will strike a light with many young people in different nations, and I agree with those who want to bring alive the values of the Commonwealth by doing more to promote gender equality through, for example, the Commonwealth Youth Gender and Equality Network. Of course that will sometimes prove controversial and uncomfortable in parts of the Commonwealth, as have other similar causes, but I hope we will not be shy in promoting the values that all nations have signed up to in the Commonwealth charter. Perhaps the Minister will say more about that.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He is making a brilliant speech, as usual. All the values that he speaks of—aid, co-operation, travel and so on—are fantastic, but is there not a case to explore military co-operation and intelligence sharing, given the threats we all face? The Commonwealth can perform a role in its own right.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If I did not know him better, I would assume that he must have cyber-attacked my speech, because he has brilliantly anticipated what I was about to say.

Development on its own—this is where my hon. Friend's point comes in—however noble, is not enough of a cause to realise the full potential of the Commonwealth. One of the key things is to tackle civic society changes as part of an embracing of all talent and good business practice. That boosts economies, security and standards of living for all. On the business side, I do not think that a future Commonwealth-wide free trade agreement is practical—I am sorry to disappoint those who believe it is. We might be able to make a start with a small coalition of the willing, but I doubt it would expand across the full panoply of the Commonwealth in the way that many of us would like.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He set out some of the reasons why today is a good day to have this debate. As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Commonwealth and chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Africa, I want to add that today Cyril Ramaphosa is signing an Africa free trade agreement. Does the hon. Gentleman not think that the potential for free trade within Africa, combined with forward-looking trade agreements with the UK that put economic development at the heart, are real opportunities for the Commonwealth?

Richard Graham: The hon. Lady is absolutely right; today is an exciting day. I think it is called the continental free trade area. It brings together 21 African nations, so by no means everybody in Africa, but it is a huge leap forward. In a sense, I am leading on to that.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Richard Graham: I of course give way to the previous Minister for the Commonwealth.

Sir Hugo Swire: Does my hon. Friend agree that another reason to be optimistic is that the incoming President of South Africa was a major figure within the Commonwealth family? He believes in the Commonwealth, he gets it, he is coming to London and hopefully he will make South Africa a far bigger player in the Commonwealth family than has hitherto been the case.

Richard Graham: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right; he will be very welcome here. The changes in southern Africa, both in Zimbabwe and South Africa itself, give us all hope that the direction of southern Africa is on a positive trend, in the sense that in both cases the changes have been done bloodlessly. I very much hope that South Africa will be a keen part of the Commonwealth again, and that perhaps next year we will be able to welcome Zimbabwe back into the Commonwealth family, which I am sure my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) would welcome, too.

Although the Department for International Trade wants to see, precisely as both hon. Members have mentioned, the benefits of intra-Commonwealth trade

spreading more widely across the Commonwealth and reaching forward to a world where free trade agreements could be more possible and practical, the biggest challenge to the ease of doing business is in the non-tariff barriers. At some point we must try to do more about the practical challenges to benefiting from cross-border trade in the way that Malaysia and Singapore, two far east Commonwealth countries, trade together over each other's borders.

It is amazing that we have not yet made more progress—by “we”, I mean the Commonwealth in this context. I first started working on these issues with the then Minister for the Commonwealth, Lord Howe, a great champion of the Commonwealth since its birth. With Lord Marland leading the charge at the reinvigorated Commonwealth and Enterprise Investment Council—my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) is part of that team—we have the opportunity to help steer the Commonwealth in a more business-friendly direction that will advocate free trade.

The potential for our own free trade agreements in the United Kingdom means that during our period of leadership of the Commonwealth over the next four years, there is no excuse for not seeing a sea change in the number of free trade agreements and direct bilateral business being done throughout the Commonwealth.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his interesting and timely speech. I fully agree that the Commonwealth is unlikely to form some kind of new trading bloc, but does he agree that it is an important framework for intergovernmental co-operation in improving the investment environment? That is the way that it will help to aid trade: by working together on things such as infrastructure, the business environment, the rule of law and governance. All those things will help to improve our trading relationships in the long term.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I know that her experience in the International Trade Committee bears on that. Those non-tariff barriers: the ease of doing business, infrastructure issues, blockages at ports, and bureaucracy and paperwork involved are all things on which we and the Commonwealth as a whole can make huge progress. She is quite right; it would make a big difference.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being generous with his time. Does he agree that improving the regulatory capacity in Commonwealth countries is an important factor in supporting and increasing trade in services? Although most businesses want to make a positive impact, some are looking to exploit the lower regulatory barriers in some developing countries. The Commonwealth can make a real difference in ensuring that the legal and regulatory frameworks in Commonwealth countries enable a free and frank negotiation of regulatory agreements.

Richard Graham: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. The question of standards and regulatory resource capacity and implementation, which ultimately boils down to the rule of law, is critical. If we say, as we often do, that among the shared values of the Commonwealth are those of democracy, language, the rule of law, accounting standards and so on, we should not be

complacent about assuming that they are all the same in every Commonwealth country and that they are equally well implemented. That comes back to one of the issues from the report by the Eminent Persons Group in 2013, which the Minister will remember well because he was in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office at the time. A commissioner was going to be appointed to look at the quality and the implementation of democracy in its widest sense, including—in my interpretation anyway—the rule of law. The business of standards is absolutely critical. The Minister may want to comment on that when he speaks.

We are hearing from across the Chamber an enthusiasm for more business, and not just for business's sake but as a catalyst for improving living standards for millions of people across all continents. We in the United Kingdom may want to look at what more we can do with our resources. It was mooted in a recent House of Lords debate that perhaps we should have more trade envoys with Commonwealth member responsibilities. I think there are seven of us at the moment who are trade envoys for the Prime Minister with Commonwealth countries, but there may be a case for increasing that number, to see whether the team would benefit from further recruits, especially from those with close links to the Commonwealth countries to which they might be appointed.

There could also be a real effort by the United Kingdom to open doors and opportunities through our large, thriving financial sector. For example, we have great fund managers such as Standard Life Aberdeen or Schroders, but I am not aware of any investment opportunity into a Commonwealth-branded fund. That would be an obvious potential opportunity. Perhaps it should be done by one of our smaller and nimbler venture capital or private equity outfits, but a Commonwealth fund could have real emotional appeal and could attract a large amount of funding that, if focused on venture capital, could encourage a resurgence of Commonwealth entrepreneurs.

At the same time, with our new and invigorated UK export finance, where we have announced huge sums of money available, particularly for the region of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, where I have trade envoy responsibilities, surely there is an opportunity at this CHOGM to make an announcement that UK export finance will provide a large fund of perhaps £2 billion to £5 billion of finance available as insurance credit for business partnerships around the Commonwealth. That would be a good start and would demonstrate our commitment to promoting greater intra-Commonwealth trade.

Behind that, there are what I might call the two step-brothers that are critical to every country across the Commonwealth: cyber and FinTech. In these sectors, the UK can offer a huge lead for, and partnership with, other Commonwealth countries. We already do so, particularly with Singapore in the far east, but there must be greater opportunities for doing so with Commonwealth partners, particularly in Africa.

I recommend that the Foreign Office—the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, rather; let us not forget the C—proposes to the Commonwealth secretary-general, my former fellow trade envoy, Baroness Scotland, that she considers setting up a new Commonwealth cyber body as soon as possible to bring together expertise from the UK and other member states, and considers

ways of increasing capacity for the protection of all digital facilities, Government and non-Government, in member states.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I am sure that he already knows this, given that he is trailing heavily with his tailcoat, but I understand that the cyber proposal he mentioned has already received considerable support, and that a large number of our fellow Commonwealth members will take it up during CHOGM.

Richard Graham: In fact I did not know that, but it makes logical sense. If that work is already under way, I am delighted. Perhaps the Minister can say more about it, because that is exactly the sort of initiative we need. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention.

The next stage, which brings me back to what my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) said, is the whole business of training and skills. For everything I have mentioned—standards, fund management, export credit, cyber and FinTech, and promotion of development causes—we will need more skills, and not just in this country but throughout the Commonwealth. Training courses and the handover of skills through higher education and vocational qualifications are critical to the way the Commonwealth moves forward. The UK has a huge amount to offer in that context through organisations such as TVET, but specific sectoral skills also need to be passed on, and there is arguably no sector more important than the armed forces and the police. Widening our security links with Commonwealth countries and improving their security will be crucial to the success of those sovereign states and to ensuring that there is less volatility in governance than there has been in some of them in the past few years.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My hon. Friend is making important points, and I commend him for bringing forward the debate. I was astonished to learn in preparation for the debate that more than half the population of the Commonwealth is under 25. One can hardly begin to imagine the potential of the creative energy of all those wonderful young people and what that could do not just for the countries of the Commonwealth but for the whole world.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, although with that goes the challenge of ensuring that those people have opportunities, and the skills and qualifications to take up those opportunities. I add another caveat: if countries such as China are going to play a greater role in the development of infrastructure in the Commonwealth, particularly in Africa, I very much hope that the resultant job opportunities are not purely for large ships full of Chinese who come over to develop that infrastructure, but for the people who live in those countries.

There we are. I have touched on prosperity and security, partly because, alongside fairness and sustainability, they are two themes of CHOGM, but also because, in the absence of security and the ability to become more prosperous, the future of individuals, families and nations is always set back. This is an important time and these are important themes.

[Richard Graham]

Let me quote:

“By pledging to serve the common good in new ways, we can ensure that the Commonwealth continues to grow in scope and stature, to have an even greater impact on people’s lives, today, and for future generations.”

That was said by she who will shortly host the greatest number of Heads of State and Government seen in this country since the 2012 Olympics: our own Queen. I believe that this CHOGM is partly to recognise, and perhaps to celebrate, Her Majesty’s incredible service to the Commonwealth and to ensure that the baton is passed on. I very much hope that the Prince of Wales and his sons and their wives play an increasing role in serving the Commonwealth, as our Queen has for so long.

Ours is a nation with much to give the world. I hope that the Government, business, charities and other organisations rise to the occasion of our hosting this year’s CHOGM, welcome India’s enhanced engagement and Gambia’s rejoining the Commonwealth, and consider all the ways we can ensure that that incredibly important and precious organisation goes from strength to strength.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. I need to begin calling the Front Benchers as close as possible to 3.30 pm, so I will impose a time limit of four minutes. That will take us a little beyond that time, so I emphasise that the limit might have to be cut if Members make interventions—I hope that they will refrain from doing so wherever possible.

2.56 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I will do the best I can in the four minutes available.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on securing the debate. In the last Parliament, I was a vice-chair of the all-party group on the Commonwealth. Unfortunately, I missed its annual general meeting this year, but it does good work, and he can be assured of my support for it. I also served on the executive of the UK branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which is one example of the many organisations he spoke about that are brought together by the Commonwealth and help to facilitate its various aims.

I agree with what the hon. Gentleman said about the Commonwealth’s good work on tackling malaria and about sight and vision. We had the Commonwealth Development Corporation at the all-party group on Malawi not that long ago. The opportunity for co-operation there is very important.

At the same time, it is important not to get misty-eyed. CHOGM gives us the opportunity to look at whether the Commonwealth’s options for the future are challenges, opportunities or both. The concept of the Commonwealth is not unrelated to the old Scots concept of the common weal. Of course, it is the Scottish National party’s ambition for Scotland one day to become an independent member of the Commonwealth in its own right. The very definition of an independent country is how it relates to and co-operates with other independent states. I note that 31 members of the Commonwealth have a

population of 1.5 million or less, and no one seems to argue that they are too small or poor to be independent, or that they need to come back to the bosom of mother Britannia.

Scotland already enjoys special status in the Commonwealth. We participate in the Commonwealth games, and we have hosted them—in Edinburgh in 1970 and 1986, and in Glasgow in 2014—and I am proudly wearing the demure and sober 2014 Commonwealth games tartan. The legacy of the Commonwealth games in host cities is another advantage of the organisation. It is notable that venues are refurbished and brought back to life, which contrasts with the grandiose venues that are sometimes constructed for Olympic games.

Scotland also has a relationship with Malawi, and today I welcomed the honourable Juliana Lunguzi, MP for Dedza East, to the House. I thoroughly agree with the idea of improved visas for India, but that should be extended across the Commonwealth. Far too often, people from Commonwealth countries, including politicians, do not have their visas granted in time. That happens time and again with Malawi.

CHOGM presents a number of questions and opportunities. If the Commonwealth is to continue to be a force for good, members must be willing to be frank with one another. That means there are opportunities to press for action on human rights—particularly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights—remembering that some of the oppressive laws in Commonwealth countries are a legacy of empire.

The question of the head of the Commonwealth is clearly under discussion, too. Even if the ceremonial head remains the monarch, perhaps there is a way of democratising the choice of the secretary-general and involving the Parliaments of member countries in that decision. On future membership—I was going to say that I joked about Scotland, but I did not; I am very serious about Scotland—there is a question about whether Ireland might come back in. We have welcomed Irish observers at recent CPA events—although, given Ireland’s record in the rugby, I am not sure whether we want its participation in the Commonwealth games.

Trade is vital. We must remember that 52 of 54 Commonwealth countries make up only 9% of our exports. As the hon. Member for Gloucester said, the Commonwealth is not a trading bloc per se, and Canada already has a deal with the EU, so we must be careful about how that is taken forward.

There is an opportunity not for misty-eyed, rose-tinted harking back to the past but for building a 21st-century organisation looking at human rights and democracy.

3 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on bringing this important debate to the Chamber. I also pay tribute to him for his obvious passion for eradicating malaria and for the education of young girls across the Commonwealth.

In the Commonwealth’s near 70-year history, it has been an incredibly difficult organisation to define. That is understandable. It is not, as some might have us believe, a remnant of empire. It is not simply an organisation that organises brilliant sporting events every four years.

It is not a military organisation like NATO, it is not a free trade organisation like the North American Free Trade Agreement, and it is not a political, economic and monetary union like the EU. Instead, it is a free association of member states including some 54 nations, with more than 30 republics, five separate monarchies and 16 Commonwealth realms lucky enough to have Her Majesty the Queen as Head of State. It is scattered around the globe on all inhabited continents. It is 11,566,870 square miles—20% of the world's land area. It has an estimated population of 2.4 billion people—and growing—which is nearly a third of the world's population, and in 2014 it produced a nominal GDP of \$10.45 trillion, representing 14% of gross world product.

In researching for the debate, I stumbled upon this quote from Wisma Putra, Malaysia's Foreign Affairs Minister. He said:

"The Commonwealth has played a catalytic role in strengthening society's capacity to manage disparity and diversity through its emphasis on the shared values and principles as enshrined in the Commonwealth charter, its good offices role, various programmes and activities as well as assistance in building democratic institutions, good governance, credible and transparent elections."

Mr Putra has summed up in one sentence what the Commonwealth is and stands for: shared values and principles; managing disparity and diversity; and encouraging sound democratic institutions and good governance. Above all, the Commonwealth fosters dialogue and discussion where otherwise, in many cases, there would be none. For the last 70 years, that has been the case. These disparate states, bound by a common history and shared endeavours, encouraged, supported and—most importantly—talked to one another.

That is the present and the past, and today we are talking about the future. Britain today is at the beginning of a new chapter of its island story. As we leave the European Union and look to foster alliances around the world with allies old and new, we look to strike trade deals and partnerships in Africa, Asia, South America, North America and Australasia. I put it to hon. Members that no country has ever been in so fortunate a position—or had a better starting point at such a juncture—as the United Kingdom today. We are a member of an organisation that spans every corner of the globe and encompasses some of the fastest growing economies in the world; that comprises 54 nations that share our values—we believe in free and fair trade as a means to grow prosperity and eradicate poverty—and our desire to build a better world for our children and our children's children. For far too long—for understandable if regrettable reasons—this country has paid far too little attention to the organisation. I am glad that, through the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting and beyond, we will begin to right that wrong.

It will not be a smooth ride—nor should it be. We do not and never should engage with Commonwealth member states as some sort of imperial master. They are bound to us by nothing but good will, a shared history and common values. We go to them as equals, but we do so from a terrific starting point. In the next few years together, the Commonwealth, with common cause and purpose, and with Britain—for the first time for far too long—at its true heart, can be the forum where, through trade, common endeavour and dialogue, we build a better future for all our peoples and make the 21st century truly the Commonwealth's century.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. Before we go to the next speaker, may I ask the Front Benchers if I could cut them down to eight minutes each so that we can hear more from the Back Benchers? Is that agreed? Given that we have not had any interventions yet, and the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) has agreed to withdraw, I can extend speaking time to five minutes for everyone else.

3.4 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for your patient chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on introducing the debate. This is a timely discussion about the role of the Commonwealth in relation to the United Kingdom as we look to the future.

My most endearing memory of involvement with the Commonwealth was as a volunteer at the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth games, where I participated in the medal ceremonies. That was a fantastic experience. Aside from getting a free kilt out of it, I had the chance to work closely with Prince Tunku Imran, who was involved with the Commonwealth Games Federation and the presentation of medals to numerous teams. It was wonderful to see the diversity of participants, from world-class athletes such as Usain Bolt to people who were participating in formal competition in their sport for the first time. It was marvellous to see that diversity imbued in the Commonwealth. That is what gives it its unique flavour: it is not just a series of diplomatic member states in a secretariat but a huge synthesis of human relationships that go much deeper and build a great degree of influence and good will across the world.

That is vital in today's globalised world, where we face major challenges and huge global inequalities. The Commonwealth's structure transcends that remarkably and provides a great forum and mechanism through which Britain can contribute to improving the condition of mankind across the world. That is why it is so relevant and critical today.

I hope that at the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting we will see a reaffirmed, firm commitment to achieve the UN sustainable development goals through Commonwealth action by the target date of 2030. Recently, I was pleased to meet the high commissioner from Malawi who came to the House of Commons to discuss Malawi matters and how vital Scotland's contribution has been to promoting development in Malawi. That was a great, heartening discussion. We had a debate on that topic in Westminster Hall recently, too. The depth of good will in the Commonwealth and the huge commercial trading and developmental opportunities that exist are clear. That is critical, and we must reaffirm our efforts to improve them and their resilience in the years ahead.

It is wonderful that as of last month Gambia has rejoined the Commonwealth. I offer my congratulations. I also hope that Zimbabwe will rejoin in due course; I believe discussions are ongoing to that effect. It is great to see the restoration of members within the Commonwealth, and that countries such as Mozambique, which were never part of the British empire and did not have a previous imperial relationship with the United Kingdom, saw the benefits of the Commonwealth and have joined it. That is a wonderful demonstration of

[Mr Paul Sweeney]

what the Commonwealth now represents. It is not a hangover from empire but a relevant organisation. It is important that it continues to adapt and prove its relevance.

One of the key ways in which it can do that is by looking at how we deal with the challenge of AIDS and HIV across the world. We must be robust with other countries in the Commonwealth—particularly around anti-LGBT laws and how they adversely affect access to the prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS across the world—and use Commonwealth mechanisms to make headway against that epidemic. I hope the Minister will raise those issues with his counterparts in the Commonwealth as part of our effort to deliver on the global goal of a world free from AIDS.

Many Members and previous leaders such as Gordon Brown have made the point about the relevance of the Commonwealth, particularly in dealing with huge global inequalities. Natural disasters contribute to \$8 billion of economic losses per year in the Commonwealth, and the combination of many of the smallest nation states in the world with many of the largest and fastest-growing nation states gives us a huge opportunity to use the Commonwealth to redistribute wealth and power globally in favour of the most marginalised people in the world. That is where our focus should be: how we use forums such as the Commonwealth games, diplomatic networks and development networks to see a redistribution of opportunity, wealth and power in favour of the weakest people in the world today. With 2.4 billion people—a third of the global population—and the fastest growing cities in the world, there is a huge opportunity to be grasped.

Engagement with the Commonwealth is vital for Britain. We must look at how we can redouble our efforts. We see opportunities for close relationships between states such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand—the more developed nations of the Commonwealth with which we share a common language and other cultural links—and we must use that wealth to redistribute across other nations of the Commonwealth and ensure global redistribution of wealth and power. That is where the Commonwealth can re-establish and reaffirm its relevance in the 21st century.

3.8 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on securing the debate. We are on the eve not only of CHOGM—for the first time in 30 years it will be held in this country—but of the Commonwealth games. As a recently appointed non-executive director of Commonwealth Games England, I want to dwell a little on that aspect and the importance of the games in bringing interaction between very different nations that are part of the Commonwealth family.

There are key strategic objectives over and above winning a lot of medals, which we hope our sportsmen and women will do. We need to deliver that success not just at the Commonwealth games, but at the Youth games that follow, which often give smaller nations an opportunity to host and benefit from everything that the Commonwealth games have to offer.

One of our key objectives is to create an English Commonwealth movement to promote personal achievement and our core values of equality, diversity and inclusion. Precisely because so many Commonwealth members are of such a young age, it is a very important opportunity to promote those values with successive new generations of citizens throughout the Commonwealth. Another objective is to be one of the most effective, respected, best-governed and well-managed sports associations in England and the Commonwealth.

As a west midlands Member of Parliament, it is a particular delight to note that Birmingham has stepped up to take the baton, which unfortunately had been dropped in the preparation for the 2022 games. The whole of the west midlands region will benefit from the opportunity to host the games and to bring many Commonwealth citizens to that part of our country. I am confident that we can do a good job.

It is significant that sport gives the opportunity to promote the benefits of Commonwealth membership. The sheer sight of two countries, North Korea and South Korea, taking part in a sporting event together under a single flag is the most recent demonstration of the opportunity that sport affords of bringing people together, which can be replicated at future Commonwealth games. It gives me the opportunity to touch on one important example of the way in which, coming together as sportsmen and women, we can also explore quite difficult subject areas together on such occasions.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which does such a splendid job in this place, is currently delivering a modern-day slavery project: a two-year multilateral project funded by the Home Office. Through seminars and workshops, the project is designed to support Commonwealth parliamentary colleagues in developing and strengthening modern slavery legislation in their own countries. I chaired a seminar on that very subject and I found it informative to hear from MPs from other Commonwealth countries what they are doing to tackle the very difficult problem of modern-day slavery. It was significant that a Nigerian MP who took part in the seminar went back to his own country and in February introduced legislation in the Nigerian House of Representatives to start to tackle the problem of slavery both at home and abroad.

There are also challenging messages that we have to be prepared to hear from other Commonwealth members. The Ghanaian Member of Parliament said that in his view the Italian Government were doing a better job of trying to tackle trafficking at source from his country than our own Government were prepared to do. We have to be willing to listen—it is a two-way conversation in the Commonwealth—and to explore where there is best practice in terms of tackling such a difficult problem as modern-day slavery. We may have been the first country to introduce legislation, but the problem is by no means sorted. Working together across the Commonwealth, which contains some of the most populous countries in the world, where, sadly, trafficking is a problem, we have a chance of dealing with it.

I hope that hosting the Commonwealth games will give us an opportunity to promote the best of British values across the Commonwealth and that at the same time we will tackle some of the difficult issues that beset all Commonwealth members at whatever stage of their development. Together we can produce a better outcome for all the countries involved.

3.13 pm

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on securing this important debate and making an excellent speech. This is a timely debate at a moment of importance in the affairs of our country, as we face a crossroads following our decision to leave the European Union. Britain is in a state of flux as we work out how we are to play effectively our global role in a new world. This is therefore an extraordinarily good moment to have this debate and to look forward to CHOGM and all that it will mean for the future of the Commonwealth and for its presence in this country.

We maintain a truly excellent but rather reduced diplomatic service, which, incidentally, must be properly resourced for its new duties, and a still highly effective military—I endorse entirely the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester—on whom we will need to spend more money in the years to come to cope with the myriad threats. But one of our most important positions is to be at the very heart of the Commonwealth with our Queen at its head. The organisation has tremendous possibilities for its members and as an institution in the years to come. It comprises 53 nations and there are more than 100 Commonwealth institutions in London alone.

The bonds of history, language and political and other institutions shared by Commonwealth members are matters of celebration and could indeed represent great opportunities for Britain in a post-Brexit world, but they should never be taken for granted. Britain should be aware that in the 45 years since we joined the European Union, the world and the Commonwealth have both changed markedly in their perception and action towards the others. Finding areas of common interest in free trade across highly sophisticated and developed economies such as the UK, Canada and Australia will be a serious challenge.

I congratulate my noble friend Lord Marland, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) and others who have driven forward the visionary work of the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council. I very much look forward to working with them over CHOGM.

Above all, in respect of the Commonwealth or any other trading organisation, we need to put flesh on the bones of global Britain, which at the moment is a slogan in pursuit of a strategy. It remains the case that there is a Commonwealth advantage. With its shared values, regulatory systems and language, there is no doubt that it has the potential to greatly increase intra-Commonwealth trade by possibly up to 20%, and could substantially cut the cost of doing business between member states. However, we need to keep a proper sense of proportion.

In 2015, 44% of our total UK exports of goods and services went to the European Union, while 9.5% went to the Commonwealth. This is a very big ask and a very important one. The biggest trade challenge for post-Brexit UK is not to get better trade deals with the rest of the world, although that would be good, but to get deals that are as good as those that now exist, most of which are multilateral and regional. We must remember that geography trumps history. This will be fiendishly difficult. Trade agreements are not something that happen at the drop of a hat; they take a lot of time and are complicated and deeply transactional.

I endorse very strongly the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester about India, which is interested in doing more trade with the United Kingdom. We have a long-standing and important relationship, but India will have its own demands on how many migrants are able to come here and the ease of getting visas to work. Surely to God we can work that out.

I wish to conclude and not take up my full time, but I wish to endorse again what my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester said in an outstanding speech about the great debt that the Commonwealth and this country owe the Sovereign for her work in keeping together the Commonwealth through thick and thin and some very difficult times indeed. I hope that the gathering of the Commonwealth family will recognise that astonishing work and will see to it that, as my hon. Friend said, the succession is passed in good order. Finally, I hope—may all of us hope—that at a correct and goodly time Zimbabwe will return to the family of the Commonwealth.

3.18 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on securing this debate and on his excellent speech, particularly his focus on the United Nations sustainable development goals.

The UK's trading future on the international stage is promising, and nowhere more so than within the Commonwealth. As a group of 54 nations, we are part of a collective comprised of 2.4 billion people—a third of the global population—and occupying about a quarter of the world's land mass. By building on our relationships within the Commonwealth, we will further the goal, set out by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, of becoming a truly global Britain.

The Commonwealth has strong foundations rooted in seven decades of collaboration. It has helped support smaller nations develop, strengthening economies and democratic institutions. Our collective economic strength is significant: a shared gross national income of more than \$10 trillion, and internal Commonwealth trade is expected to grow to \$1 trillion by 2020. As we seek to develop new opportunities further, we do so from a platform of shared histories. In many cases we have a common language and a common legal structure. We should therefore in theory have fewer barriers to overcome in reaching agreements. Already, 80% of Commonwealth countries benefit from preferential access to the UK's market. Furthermore, the Royal Commonwealth Society has highlighted the fact that there are already significant trade advantages within the bloc. In a recent study it found that transaction costs between two Commonwealth partners are 19% less than they are between non-Commonwealth nations: that is driven largely by language and legal systems.

When we consider bolstering our trading relations internationally, we need to do it strategically. I am pleased that the Department for International Trade is working with many of our partners to lay down the basis for future trade agreements. However, we are limited by our capacity to broker deals. Free trade agreements are clearly an ambition, and rightly. However, they do not always meet expectations. In most cases deals are designed around goods, but if we are to capitalise on our competitive advantages they will need to include service markets. The reality is that for businesses

[Gillian Keegan]

that trade internationally there are several non-tariff barriers that free trade agreements often do not address, such as licensing agreements, capital controls and ownership rules. The British Chambers of Commerce identified non-tariff barriers as the most important area of concern for business in non-EU third-party agreements.

Julia Lopez: One of the difficulties that businesses have faced in recent years, particularly in trading with such places as Australia and New Zealand, is the movement of personnel. Because we have had such free and easy migration arrangements with Europe, it has been a problem to try to get movement from those other countries. Does my hon. Friend agree that an interesting idea to consider is something like a realm visa, which would give easy access to people from countries where the Queen is the Head of State, such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada?

Gillian Keegan: Yes, I do agree. As we design an immigration system to meet the needs of the country, we will not have either artificial numbers or systems that do not meet the needs of businesses or our skills agenda.

Today the EU has, or is negotiating, trade deals with more than 80% of Commonwealth countries, in part thanks to the efforts of UK Governments, so we must ensure that we develop bilateral agreements to replace them. Bespoke deals could do just that. Singapore, for example, is a tech business hub for its region and could be a potential gateway to other Asian countries for British businesses. Like finance, technology consolidates in hubs, around talent and investment. We already enjoy a prominent position in the sector, with 18% of global data flows passing through the UK, so there is opportunity to grow. Singapore is currently finalising a deal with the EU.

We therefore hopefully have a foundation from which to work, with the potential for it to be more tailored to our national interests. Canada, too, has a basis from which to work, with the EU-Canada comprehensive economic and trade agreement. Furthermore, we are Canada's largest export market within the EU, and therefore there is a great mutual benefit to striking a deal.

In 2015 UK Commonwealth exports were £47.4 billion, with five larger economies—Australia, Canada, India, Singapore and South Africa—accounting for 70% of our Commonwealth exports and 65% of imports. There is therefore scope to expand our working relationships with the smaller developing Commonwealth nations. Technology, regulation, standards and skills training can act as a gateway to greater investment and openness in developing economies and provide career opportunities for large numbers of young people.

The Commonwealth provides the UK with a great opportunity for the further development of economic, diplomatic and cultural ties with nations that already have much in common with us. As the Prime Minister said last year, we face new and unprecedented joint challenges, and we all have a responsibility to work together as partners to ensure that the Commonwealth has the institutional strength to face them. Our trading relationships, if executed strategically, will drive prosperity both here and throughout the Commonwealth.

3.24 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on obtaining the debate and on an excellent and thought-provoking speech.

This is an important time for our future as members of the Commonwealth. There is little doubt that the United Kingdom is at something of a turning point in its relations with the world, as several hon. Members have mentioned. It is at times of strife and change that we look to our steadfast and historic Commonwealth allies to provide some sort of security. Those nations represent peoples around the world with whom we have an affinity and share a history, and whose values are similar. Our shared history makes our shared future, through our dealings with the Commonwealth in the years to come, uncontroversial. We have a bright future in which to work with new and old alliances around the world, to secure our future place in it. I contend that we must be careful that we do not look to the Commonwealth only in extremis. We must not become known as a friend who calls only when they want something. It is not in crisis or strife that we want to build our future together; it is on the basis of a conscious decision to change our view of the world from a European perspective to a more global identity.

The potential for the UK to forge ahead in global terms offers significant advantages to the economy in the shape of new emerging markets in the Commonwealth, to sell our products to and to buy from. It offers investment opportunities in economies of all shapes and sizes, in which we can place investments, and where we can seek investors in our economy. House of Commons Library research states that the Commonwealth is already a significant and important part of our economy, representing £21.6 billion of exports in 2017. In Scotland, where we have strong affection for the Commonwealth, the figure is £2.7 billion. That is not a small part of our economic mix.

However, my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester did not miss the mark when he pointed out the challenge of creating a mix between mature consumer economies such as Canada and Australia and developing economies, and other Members also commented on that. There is huge benefit for all concerned to be gained by working together. Beyond that, there is also immense potential for us to develop cultural and social links. As I mentioned in an intervention on my hon. Friend, more than half of the Commonwealth population of more than 2 billion is under the age of 25.

I want to end by returning to the words of Her Majesty the Queen that were quoted earlier, which I find inspirational. She recently said in Westminster Abbey:

“By pledging to serve the common good in new ways, we can ensure that the Commonwealth continues to grow in scope and stature, to have an even greater impact on people's lives, today, and for future generations.”

In the spirit of that idea of the common good, I want to ask the Minister two questions about the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. How do the Government intend to use CHOGM to raise the profile of the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative, which they have championed? Also, how shall we raise the

principle of freedom of religion and belief through CHOGM? Sadly, it is not universally observed in the Commonwealth in accordance with article 18 of the United Nations declaration of human rights.

I hope that in the spirit of Her Majesty's remarks we shall now turn as a faithful friend to our friends in the Commonwealth, nurture friendship and family connection with the Commonwealth, and reverse the neglect that we have shown for decades. In doing so, we can fulfil Her Majesty's stated hopes and aspirations for the Commonwealth and further enhance her wonderful and lasting legacy.

3.28 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as deputy chairman of the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council.

I want to join in the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). My old friend is a stalwart proponent of all things Commonwealth. It is very good that we have Commonwealth debates from time to time. When I was the Commonwealth Minister at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, it became difficult, at times, to persuade officials and others of what an important opportunity the Commonwealth was, although people are finally waking up to that. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames): the Commonwealth cannot replicate the EU, but it is certainly a vital bolt-on part of Britain's future, in terms of our economic and trading development.

The debate is timely, coming on the eve of the Commonwealth games, which will start in Brisbane shortly. I was the Minister when the games were hosted by the British Government and the city of Glasgow—the Labour city of Glasgow—which hosted them so well on behalf of us all.

As we look forward to CHOGM in just under a month's time, I am sure there will be a huge turnout from Heads of State, not least because Her Majesty is entertaining at home. Indeed, I would not be at all surprised—this is all I will say—if there is an extremely high level of participation by all members of the royal family.

In the time remaining, let me give an unashamed plug for the work of the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council and the stalwart job our small team is doing. We will have 800 senior businesses in London, and we will hold a series of sessions, including on accessing modern financial services, easing the pathway for business and growth, harnessing Commonwealth technology and innovation, creating a new attitude to sustainable business, mobilising an export economy, and attracting inward investment. Those things are important not only to the United Kingdom, but right across the Commonwealth.

The combined GDP of the Commonwealth will reach \$14 trillion by 2020. Intra-Commonwealth trade was \$525 billion in 2015, and that is set to rise to \$1 trillion by 2020. We have heard a lot of statistics today about what the Commonwealth stands for, but I believe they are worth repeating. The Commonwealth is currently a group of 53 countries. I echo the desire for Zimbabwe to return to the Commonwealth fold one day soon, after having been thrown out because of Mr Mugabe. In a

rather different way, the Maldives exited itself from the Commonwealth, and I very much hope that it, too, will return to the Commonwealth family, where it surely belongs. There is a road to redemption, as evidenced by Fiji, which was out of the Commonwealth for a while but now plays an increasing role within it. I suspect it will play an even bigger role in the years ahead.

It is worth bearing in mind when we talk about the Commonwealth that we are talking about a quarter of the world's GDP and a third of the world's population, 60% of whom, as we have heard, are under 30. At 1 billion people, the middle class of India alone exceeds the population of Europe. These are huge numbers.

I think that the Commonwealth has a rosy future. We are looking forward to the business forum that will take place over three days from 16 to 18 April, just before CHOGM. I think that will set the pace for a good Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. When it is all over, hopefully we will all congratulate ourselves, but that is when the real work begins. I hope that we can persuade colleagues in the Government to give the same attention to the Commonwealth after the Heads of Government meeting as they have suddenly been giving it in the last few weeks, in the run-up to that meeting.

3.33 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to be able to begin the summing-up. I commend the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) for securing the debate and for his knowledgeable and informative introduction to it.

I am pleased to see so many people from Scotland here, because that accentuates the place that the Commonwealth has, and will continue to have, in the hearts of the people of Scotland. It also explains why, for the first time since I have been in Parliament, and possibly for the first time in recorded history, the Chair actually increased the time limit for a speech. However, I noticed, Mr Davies, that you waited until two of the Scots had spoken before you did so. I will try to leave time for them to get an extra minute each before the debate concludes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) made a well-informed speech, as would be expected given his long and dedicated track record of service to Commonwealth countries. A number of Members have mentioned the fantastic experience that was the Commonwealth games in Glasgow. When the world's friendliest sporting event pitches up in the world's friendliest city, we can be sure there's going to be one heck of a party. I was pleased to attend, although unlike some Members, I did not get a uniform and I had to pay for my own ticket, but I enjoyed myself just the same.

I do not have time to mention the contributions from all the Members who have spoken, but I will pick up one or two points. I commend the dedication of the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) in taking on another commitment and promoting the success of the Commonwealth games, but I must take issue with the idea that winning medals matters a jot at the games. The Commonwealth games are a much greater spectacle and common humanity event than the Olympic games because, although the vast majority of spectators want to see the best, there is no jingoistic determination to get more medals than the next person.

[Peter Grant]

It would be a tragedy if we allowed the Commonwealth games to be soured by that mentality. We expect everybody who turns up to do the best they can.

Some of the most excited people I saw in Glasgow were the bowls team from Niue. It has a population of 2,000, but it managed to find a bowls team that gave Scotland a heck of a hard game. They and their compatriots went home without a medal between them, but they had a brilliant time and made a lot of friends. That is what the Commonwealth is about. Once that was what the Olympic games were about, and we are all poorer for the fact that that does not happen.

My deep worry is that there seems to be a thread running through the debate that the purpose of the Commonwealth after we leave the European Union might be about restoring our trading links. The Commonwealth is not there just for us to trade with to enrich investors and business owners in the United Kingdom. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North pointed out, this should be about “common wealth”, and the big problem with the Commonwealth is that, despite the benefit of hundreds of years of benign colonial intervention from the mother of all democracies, the vast majority of it is still a desperately impoverished place.

Half the GDP of the Commonwealth comes from the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia—they have barely 5% of the population, but half the GDP. Two thirds of Commonwealth citizens live in countries whose GDP per head of population is less than a 10th of the world average. If we were to use one description to characterise the lives of the vast majority of citizens of the Commonwealth, it would be “desperate, desperate poverty”. Surely, in the name of God, if we are looking to achieve something with new trade links and by expanding world trade links, lifting those 2 billion people out of poverty must be more important than further enriching investors who hide their money in tax havens elsewhere.

Mr Sweeney: There has been much rhetoric about free trade, but this must also be about fair trade and redistribution of wealth, as much as anything else.

Peter Grant: That is absolutely correct and a very valid point. We must ask ourselves where this new trade will come from. The list of countries with which the European Union—and therefore the UK—has a trade deal or will have one by the time we leave, already includes a lot of the Commonwealth’s economic powerhouses, such as South Africa, Canada, Singapore and the large but unequal economy of India. We are effectively looking for trade deals with poor countries full of poor people. Are we saying that we will start having trade deals that benefit those people, rather than ourselves? I hope so.

Julia Lopez: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: I do not have time to take too many interventions—I apologise.

I have a deep interest in the Commonwealth. My mum was from a very large family, and a lot of her younger sisters took the £10 single ticket to Australia. As happened in those days, they all changed their name when they got married, so none of them bears my grandad’s name. However, I am delighted that the

descendants of the “Mighty Quinn”, a humble plumber from Newarthill in Lanarkshire, now run into the hundreds and contribute to the economic and social wealth of the great country of Australia. When I was putting my notes together, I actually forgot that my wife is the daughter of an Asian Commonwealth immigrant—perhaps that is what happens when we think of people as who they are, rather than where they came from and what colour their skin is.

As I said, Commonwealth countries collectively comprise some of the poorest citizens in the world. If we want to keep our entitlement to talk about the Commonwealth, we must do something to make it a bit more common to all. Some of the suggestions about the way that trade can be used are beneficial, but we should be careful about some of the others. One thing that most Commonwealth countries have in common is that their people were once exploited for the benefit of Great Britain. We cannot and must not allow that to happen again. If we want to contribute to the future of the Commonwealth, we must talk honestly and openly about its history. Some parts of that history do not make Britain or its constituent nations look particularly good, and I include Scotland in that, because the role that it played in the oppression and exploitation of citizens in other countries is something that none of us can be too proud of.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North mentioned the close links with Malawi—an example of how the new relationships can be made more positive. I am happy to place on record the extraordinary contribution to that link that was made by Jack McConnell, the then Labour First Minister of Scotland. His drive and determination created what is now probably the closest and best-developed bilateral link between any two nations on the planet. An astonishing 46% of people in Scotland know somebody with direct personal involvement in Malawi. Much of that is due to the fact that Malawians are eternally grateful for the part played by David Livingstone in abolishing the slave trade in their part of Africa and in helping to lead to its abolition elsewhere.

I cannot mention Malawi without singing the praises of the astonishing Mary’s Meals organisation. If hon. Members have not heard of it, they should hear about it. From literally nothing a few short years ago, it is now feeding over 1 million starving children every day—an extraordinary achievement by some extraordinary people. I hope that is the kind of spirit that can lead to the Commonwealth going from strength to strength.

The Commonwealth is not particularly a trading organisation, and I do not think it ever should be. It is not just about the Commonwealth games, but if the only thing the Commonwealth did was the Commonwealth games, it would still be worth celebrating. As I have mentioned, I was delighted when the games came to visit the city of my birth.

Leaving aside seeing the team from Niue, one of the things that we sometimes forget about the Commonwealth games is that it is not just 53 countries that take part, but 71. The Commonwealth Games Federation recognises the status of countries that are not officially countries according to the United Nations or the International Olympic Federation. For example, Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man can compete in their own colours. The Commonwealth games are the only major competition

in the calendar where world-class track or field athletes from England can compete in the colours of England. I think that is great.

The spirit of the Commonwealth games was best demonstrated by the lad from England who finished 10th in the marathon—didn't he get a medal? His doctor said to him 18 months earlier, "You're 6 stone overweight. Exercise or die." So he exercised and exercised and exercised, and finished up the best-placed competitor for his country in the marathon in that great city. If the Commonwealth and our membership of it can inspire us all to put that amount of dedication into contributing something, whether to the Commonwealth games, the Commonwealth Heads of Government summit or Commonwealth-based organisations, the Commonwealth very much has a future ahead of it. I am proud to stand here as a citizen of the Commonwealth, and I hope to remain a citizen of the Commonwealth for the rest of my days.

3.42 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to follow the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant). I am grateful to the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) for securing this debate. We have heard many excellent speeches today; it has been an interesting debate.

Like the hon. Member for Glenrothes, I think there have been too many contributions for me to acknowledge every single one, but I was particularly struck by the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and her words about the importance of the Commonwealth games. I know the benefits they brought to my home city, Manchester; I look forward to the upcoming games in Australia and wish Birmingham all the best for 2022.

There were many important points made. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) also spoke about the importance of the Commonwealth games and the pleasure he took in participating and obtaining his free kilt, which maybe we will see him wearing one day. He also spoke clearly about the serious challenge of AIDS and HIV and how that is influenced by anti-LGBT laws. That is an area we need to look at in our relationships with the Commonwealth.

Many hon. Members have spoken about the benefits of trade arrangements with the Commonwealth. While I appreciate that in this post-Brexit world we are looking toward increasing our trading relationships with our Commonwealth partners, at the heart of the Commonwealth, as so many have said, is good will and co-operation, shared values and shared legal systems. We must remember that, and we must keep the sustainable development goals at the heart of everything we do. That does not preclude trade arrangements—sustainable development goal 9 talks about industry, innovation and infrastructure—but we must balance those things with reducing inequality, eradicating poverty, zero hunger and the important goal of ensuring that girls have access to 12 years of education by the year 2030, which the hon. Member for Gloucester referred to in his speech.

The question of who should be the next Head of the Commonwealth has arisen; I was interested to see that referred to in the House of Commons Library research paper, because I was not aware that it was in dispute. According to the House of Commons Library, it is not a foregone conclusion that Prince Charles will become

the next Head of the Commonwealth, and that will feature in the CHOGM discussions in April. It will be interesting to keep an eye on developments there; I was not aware of the matter, and I had assumed it was a natural succession, but it seems some Commonwealth countries are saying they would like to elect a different Head. That will be an interesting one to keep an eye on.

It is particularly apt, as many hon. Members have said, that we are having this discussion prior to the CHOGM meeting in April. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association hosted the Commonwealth Parliamentarians Forum here in Westminster at the end of February, which gave parliamentarians an opportunity to engage with the overarching CHOGM theme, "Towards a common future", with its key objectives of a more sustainable future, a fairer future, a more secure future and a more prosperous future, and its cross-cutting themes of youth, gender and inclusion.

The Commonwealth abides by the Latimer House principles, which guide governance, Parliament, the judiciary and the law-making process. It is also guided by its own charter, which commits to democracy, human rights, international peace and security, as well as recognising equality, the role of civil society, sustainable development and the importance of young people, who, as already mentioned, make up 60% of the 2.4 billion people in the Commonwealth.

To summarise, in an era of uncertainty, changing economic circumstances, new trade and economic patterns, unprecedented threats to peace and security, and a surge in popular demands for democracy, human rights and broadened economic opportunities, the potential of, and need for, the Commonwealth as a compelling force for good and an effective network for promoting development and co-operation has never been greater.

3.48 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and a particular pleasure to respond to such a debate, where there has been a common thread among colleagues and where the speeches have all emphasised different aspects of a remarkable institution to which this House and all its Members are deeply committed. It is a joy to be able to respond. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) for securing this debate at such an important time for the Commonwealth, and for a charming and erudite speech in promotion of its values and everything else.

As my colleagues from the respective Front Benches said, there was too much in the speeches to cover everything, but I will try to pick out individual points. I must say that my sense that the Commonwealth is in good hands, as far as colleagues in the House are concerned, is very much enhanced by what all have said in picking out the different aspects of this extraordinary relationship that we all wish to enhance. That task within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office falls to Lord Ahmad; I speak here on his behalf. I praise the work he has been engaged on over the last few months. He was worked tirelessly in relation to CHOGM and continues to do so.

Many colleagues have spoken warmly of the connections we all share with other members of the Commonwealth, and of the organisation's enormous potential for good. My family is no different from any other. Three cousins

[*Alistair Burt*]

in Dundee looked at their futures in the early 1920s. One went to South Africa, one went to Canada and one stayed in Scotland. That is not an unfamiliar family pattern, particularly for my family north of the border. Families and other close ties cover so many different aspects of the Commonwealth relationship. As I will make clear, there is no sense that the only particular focus is on the trading relationship. It covers so much more, as almost all the speeches made clear.

The belief in the organisation's potential as a force for good is shared by the Government. I will set out how we would like next month's CHOGM meeting to agree ways in which together we can drive progress in realising the full potential of the Commonwealth. Next month promises to be a wonderful celebration of the modern Commonwealth, starting with two weeks of friendly athletic endeavour at the Commonwealth games in Australia's Gold Coast.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) may like to explain his concept of a medal-less games to the Australians. I wish him joy in that. However, his point was well made; it is indeed "the friendly games" and always has been. However, there is importance in winning. When I was a 15-year-old cross-country runner and Ian Stewart won the 5,000 metres in Edinburgh in 1970, that made us all incredibly proud. Winning matters, but the spirit of the Commonwealth games clearly matters far more, as the hon. Gentleman was right to put it.

I wish my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) very well for the games coming up in Birmingham. She was right to flag how important that is and how important it will be for the city, just as it was for Manchester and all that was contributed there. That sense of athleticism and of joy that is created around Commonwealth games and Paralympic sport is something we all value hugely.

The week after the Commonwealth games, there will be a summit here in the UK, and the month will conclude with celebrations marking the 92nd birthday of Her Majesty the Queen. I put on the record, on behalf of the Government, our admiration of the extraordinary contribution made by Her Majesty over the years. The Westminster Abbey quote used by several colleagues emphasises how much the Commonwealth means to her. Indeed, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, whose commitment to the Commonwealth, and the passion with which he speaks about it throughout all his charitable work and other endeavours, speaks for itself. We should be very proud of the contribution made by both Her Majesty and His Royal Highness to the Commonwealth.

For the summit we will have the privilege of welcoming to the United Kingdom national leaders, Foreign Ministers, business and civil society representatives and, perhaps most importantly, young people from every corner of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth is a unique global network. Its member countries together cover more than a quarter of the world's land mass, are home to a third of the world's population and account for a fifth of the world's trade. Perhaps most importantly for the future of this great institution and the wider world is that more than two thirds of the Commonwealth's people—around a billion people; one in seven of the world's population—are under 30 years of age, as has

been mentioned. Those figures show the Commonwealth's immense potential to be an influential player on the global stage in the years ahead.

We have seen the tremendous impact that the Commonwealth can have when it acts as one, as it did in helping South Africa to transition from the injustice of apartheid to the free and democratic society it is today. At the last summit in Malta in 2015, we saw how Heads of Government came together to press for the ambitious climate change agreement forged in Paris just one month later, and we witnessed the valuable work of the Secretary-General and Commonwealth secretariat in helping to broker a political agreement in Zambia.

However, if the Commonwealth is to continue this important work and remain strong, relevant and fit to face the challenges of the 21st century, it must have a clear purpose that is supported by all 53 member states. My hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), in his excellent speech, which set out what the Commonwealth is not, managed to indicate what it is: this coming together of states, nations and peoples for no other purpose than their wanting to be together, which is so important.

All member states have agreed to focus on four clear priorities at the summit next month—to reassure hon. Members, each priority is as important as the other—and they will all be focuses on which the leaders will agree action. The first aim is to build a more prosperous future by making the compelling case for free trade as the best way to promote higher living standards around the world. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire)—a former Minister for the Commonwealth—made clear, when talking about the Commonwealth business forum, what needs to be done. He spoke of the real work that will follow the summit, and he is absolutely right.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), in talking about global Britain and the opportunities of that, made the point that global Britain is fine as a slogan, but that we have to deliver. The Commonwealth provides an opportunity, in conjunction with other work we will do, to do just that. Again, the commitment to the Commonwealth shown by both my right hon. Friends over the years has been extraordinary. We are in their debt.

The second priority is to build a safer future by addressing new security challenges, such as cyber-terrorism and online extremism. A cyber agreement is being discussed as we speak. The third aim is to build a sustainable future by helping small island and vulnerable states to mitigate the effects of climate change and by helping the Commonwealth to face other crises. In that context, we can look at some things mentioned by colleagues as they look at other crises. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester talked about malaria, which is a serious health concern for many Commonwealth countries. No decision has been taken on what will be raised at the summit, but we are pleased to note that Malaria No More will hold a malaria summit. It is a matter of great concern.

The final aim to be talked through is to create a fairer, freer and more inclusive future by promoting the values, enshrined in the Commonwealth charter, of democracy and good governance. So many things were mentioned about that. My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden spoke of the importance of addressing migration

and modern slavery. That will absolutely be right up there. The summit is also certainly an opportunity to demonstrate leadership on the education of women and girls, which my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester mentioned. It will certainly be raised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) raised two questions: freedom of religion and belief, and the preventing sexual violence initiative. Both subjects will very much be raised at the summit and we anticipate discussions on both. We will use the summit to uphold the values of the charter, which are so important to many here. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) raised the sustainable development goals—I am glad to see her wearing the badge—and the CHOGM summit will be important to that. I know that this also matters to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who raised the importance of LGBT issues. Those are other issues of real value. Although some of the subjects are difficult, he can be assured that the values are clear and that the determination will be strong.

The summit is a priority for the Government, and our ambition is encapsulated in the theme, “Towards a Common Future”: to reinvigorate the Commonwealth and to help to make it an even more active and influential global network. We want the summit to be an important milestone for the Commonwealth—a point in its history where it shows it is fit and able to take on the challenges of the 21st century. If the speeches today are anything to go by, I am sure it will be.

3.58 pm

Richard Graham: This debate has shown the House at its best, coming together in support of a great cause and great organisation and having a great discussion about what the future contribution of our country and the House can be towards helping the Commonwealth on its journey towards a really exciting future. I am grateful to all those who joined the debate, to the Minister for his response, which was helpful in both tone and content, and to you, Mr Davies, for chairing the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the Commonwealth.

Houses in Multiple Occupation: Combined Planning Applications

[DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered houses in multiple occupation and combined planning applications.

I am sure that I will not be the last person to say what a pleasure and delight it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I apologise to Westminster Hall for bringing a planning matter before it. I realise that many of us who have served in local government dread planning issues: there seems to be no good news; we seem always to be trying to balance the perfectly reasonable requirements of the developers with the protection of our constituents. However, in relation to the concern about the cumulative impact of applications for houses in multiple occupation, I am entirely confident that this is a matter of such significance that it should be brought to the attention of the House, for two particular reasons. One is that a consultation is currently under way on the national planning policy framework—I was delighted to see on the Government website that the consultation period ends at 11.45 pm on 10 May 2018. I profoundly hope that the Minister will be able to carry some of the comments made in this debate forward into that consultation process.

I realise that the Government issued in July last year a briefing paper entitled “Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) England and Wales”, and the Welsh Government produced an extremely good document in May 2015. However, those documents refer to houses in multiple occupation from the point of view of structure, safety and planning enforcement. I am here because of a group of residents in my constituency, in Perivale—a part of the world that many people will breeze by effortlessly as they glide along Western Avenue, along the A40. They probably do not even know it is there, but it matters to us and to the people of Perivale.

My constituents, in Ribchester Avenue and Wyresdale Crescent, suddenly discovered a couple of months ago that a group of linked companies—some of them seem to be based in two continents other than our own—are buying up properties in those quiet suburban streets. Just to put you in the picture, Mr Hanson, they are 1930s buildings—the typical stucco-fronted 1930s suburban buildings that are so close to my heart. They are semi-detached, by and large. Suddenly they were being bought up—in some cases with cash—and converted into houses in multiple occupation.

Under present planning law, houses in multiple occupation are classified as class C4 if there are between three and six unrelated individuals living there. The Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 is pretty clear on the subject, and I do not argue with it, but what the legislation does not do is consider the cumulative impact of a large number of these developments springing up on the same street. The Minister will doubtless refer to article 4 directions. I can come on to article 4 directions in a moment and show why that is an utter waste of time—it is a mere sop. It is a total and utter irrelevance when it comes to addressing the issue because—

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I just wonder what the hon. Gentleman's response will be to the NPPF consultation, in view of what he has said about houses in multiple occupation. What will he propose that we change, and how would he like to see that turn out?

Stephen Pound: May I implore the hon. Gentleman to hold his patience for a moment? If he does, he will hear exactly what I propose. I propose entirely new legislation—an amendment to article 4 directions. I know that the Minister will seize it and rush from this building with it clutched in her hand to change the law immediately, because she is on the side of the angels on this issue.

One of my constituents found that the house next door—the semi-detached property—had been bought by a series of linked companies, and they proceeded to convert it into an HMO. I have to say that the place burnt down during the works, which is unfortunate but it has happened. There was no party wall agreement, which is extremely unfortunate. More sinisterly, when my constituent went to see the planning officer, she discovered, as did I, that every single HMO application in that tight little suburban backwater is considered individually. There is no consideration under planning law of the cumulative impact—what I would call the saturation—in these cases.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend could be describing a situation far from Ealing, on Birches Head Road in Stoke-on-Trent. The frustrating thing with all this is that they are considered as individual applications. Does he agree that when companies make it known at the outset that they intend to buy up one, two, three, four or even five properties in small residential areas, that ought to be taken into consideration?

Stephen Pound: I have never knowingly disagreed with my hon. Friend ever since I took part in his by-election campaign, which was a success—that probably had nothing to do with my involvement. I absolutely agree with him. Let us get one thing straight: the Mayor of London and most strategic planning authorities recognise that there is a place and a role for HMOs, and London councils are quite keen on the idea. There is a recognition that HMOs can provide low-cost housing for people, particularly as starter homes. I have no problem with that. The issue is the fact that there is no lateral linkage. At the very least, the law should require companies that are linked—circuitously or laterally—to declare that they are the same company, and we should consider the cumulative impact of applications.

Mr Hanson, if you were building a block that would accommodate 40 or 50 people, you would have to go through an entirely different planning regime. There would have to be section 106 provision, a community infrastructure levy, an impact assessment and consideration of sewerage, light, water, education, health—all the surrounding issues—and rightly so, because they would have an impact on the local community. You would have to look at the local school provision and health provision. But with multiple HMOs that is not the case. They can spring up like toadstools after a spring rain. They can come up all over Perivale and there is no consideration of what will happen to Selborne Primary School, Perivale Primary School or St John Fisher

Primary School. There is no consideration of what will happen to the Hillview surgery, the medical centre. That cannot be right—

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con) *rose*—

Stephen Pound: And I am sure the hon. Gentleman will tell me why it cannot be right.

Andrew Lewer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene. The relocation of the University of Northampton has caused a surge in planning applications for HMOs and a lot of unease among the residents of Far Cotton. Although Northampton Borough Council has a policy of restricting HMO density to 15% within any given area, that has been complicated by planning appeal decisions and a rise in unlicensed HMOs in the area. The community accepts that some change will take place; it is the scale that has caused the problem, as he has explained. How would his proposal assist this problem?

Stephen Pound: I seem to have struck a nerve. This issue is not unique to Perivale. Perivale may be unique, but in this matter it is not, quite clearly. The point is that at the moment local residents are profoundly disturbed because they see the character of their area changing and there is nothing that the planning officers can do. Last Sunday week, Councillor Tariq Mahmood, a local councillor, and I met the residents in the street, in Wyresdale Crescent, and to my horror I discovered that three local residents—families I have known for years—were selling up and moving out because they could not stand the character of their street changing from a quiet residential backwater into a row of houses in multiple occupation, and of course that then accelerates the process. Those three sell up, and before we know where we are we have a constant row of them.

I am not implying for a moment that the people who live in HMOs have riotous parties all night. This is about the number of people. There are issues of parking and refuse collection, as well as the drain and demand on local services. When Councillor Mahmood and I and the other two Perivale ward councillors, Councillors Charan Sharma and Munir Ahmed, went to see the chief planning officer at Ealing, David Scourfield, he said in effect, “My hands are tied; there is very little I can do,” and he referred to an article 4 direction, which I will come on to in a moment. Despite the fact that it is a total and utter waste of time and a complete irrelevance, it happens to be statute law and therefore I shall refer to it.

In the situation that I have described, what recourse is left for local residents? One of the residents has done an enormous amount of investigation and discovered that five of the properties, each one registered with a different company, are in fact all related to the same company. They all come back to the same addresses, in two cases outside the United Kingdom, and even outside the continent of Europe. Why could it not be a legal requirement for people to say that when making these multiple applications? If one company—David Hanson plc of north Wales, for example—decided to build 50 HMOs in Perivale, it would have to declare it. You would also have to declare it to the House authorities, Mr Hanson, but that is neither here nor there. However, at the moment companies do not have to declare that, because each application is considered individually.

The draft London plan, to which I referred earlier, does recognise the importance. It says in “(H12) 4.12.7”:

“Houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) are an important part of London’s housing offer, reducing pressure on other elements of the housing stock. Their quality can, however, give rise to concern.”

Here is the issue: quality. Quality is not an issue, because building enforcement can apply in these cases, but more importantly, the fire brigade has to certify. Therefore, there is the certification process and the licensing process, but that does not solve the problem. Why does it not solve the problem? It is partly because planning permission is not required in order to be a licensed HMO. Even worse, in London there is actually a numerical limit on the number of HMO licences that a local authority can give—I cannot speak for Reading, Stoke or Northampton. That means that once that ceiling is reached, the pressure of withholding a licence cannot be used by a council to make a difference. That seems to be an anomalous situation. I can understand why and how it has come about, but it is not helping the people of Perivale, and I do not think it is helping the people of Stoke, Northampton or Reading either.

The article 4 directions are what are normally flagged up. They are normally considered to be

“backstop powers to require developers to apply for planning permission for HMO conversions”.

Councils may use them

“in cases where they have concerns about the impact of a concentration of HMOs on local objectives in an area.”

Marvellous! That is music to my ears—absolutely delightful. This is where the council has backstop powers where there is a concern about the impact of a concentration of HMOs. Sadly, all is not well. It might appear good, but this is the curate’s egg. There might be a good bit, but most of it is completely rotten.

The plan continues:

“A council has to give 12 months’ notice before it can use an Article 4 Direction”—

meaning that the powers have no use whatsoever

“for reacting swiftly or efficiently”.

It goes on:

“If a council cannot wait 12 months to use an Article 4 Direction because it would risk the best interests of their residents...they must pay compensation costs.”

I need hardly say that local authorities are under unprecedented financial pressure and simply to take the risk of having to pay in these particular cases would be untenable.

Equally:

“If a council uses an Article 4 direction, it will not necessarily prohibit the development or change of use.”

What use is it? That is ridiculous. It is as much use as a chocolate teapot. I see no more purpose in it whatsoever. It simply means that local people may have an opportunity to make representations and the elected representatives can decide on the development’s merits, but after the horse has bolted.

Article 4 directions must be reduced to get rid of the 12-month notice period and the compensation provisions. These are handcuffs. These are a ball and chain on local councils. It is impossible for a serious, sensible and concerned local council to actually act in the ambit of the article 4 direction, if 12 months’ notice must be

given, plus the concentration provision. It simply makes no sense whatsoever. I believe that the Local Government Association has made representations to the Minister and her Secretary of State on this matter.

Planning law has to balance the two priorities. In the case of HMOs, I think we tended to look at it through the prism of student accommodation, or accommodation in some rundown, old areas, where it seemed to be a regeneration and gentrifying tool—in some cases it was; in some cases it was not. In the case of Perivale, it seems to me that someone has constructed a financial algorithm that says, “Because house prices here are lower than in the rest of west London, for the moment, where you can buy a three-bedroom suburban house for under £700,000”—that might raise eyebrows in Stoke but, believe me, it is pretty good value for money in west London—“if that is split into six units, you will get about £1,000 a month in rent.” Do the maths, as they say. It will work out as a very profitable arrangement. One of the people behind these companies is based in Brooklyn, New York, which is not normally closely linked with the London borough of Ealing, let alone Perivale. That suggests to me that this is a straightforward financial consideration that someone has made.

I am in no way opposed to people making a few honest bob. Good luck to them. I am quite new Labour about this. I think that people should be able to make money, but not at the expense of suffering constituents and residents, who wake up in the morning to find that what was their home—their parent’s home, in many cases—their neighbourhood and their area have changed utterly beyond recognition. What about the people moving in there? The young professionals or students moving into an HMO in Perivale are not going to be welcomed, wanted, liked or loved; it is going to be damn difficult for them.

What worries me most of all, however, is the fact that people look to their local authority, just as they look to us as Members of Parliament, to protect and defend their rights and interests. We must do that. The law should work for people, not against them. In this case, by tightening up an article 4 direction and maybe having a look at some of the other regulations within the use classes order, we can solve this problem. Now is the right time to solve this problem, because the national planning policy framework is subject to consultation at the moment.

I want my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) to make a brief speech. Mr Hanson. I hope that I have not been overly emotional, but I cannot stress too strongly the impact of this sort of development on quiet, decent, ordinary suburban people, who have not asked for this, do not want it and cannot endure it much longer. I look to the Government to come to their rescue.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I will call Mr Rodda to speak, but we must remember that the debate finishes at 4.30 pm and the Minister has to respond.

4.17 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Hanson, for the opportunity to speak briefly in the debate. I welcome the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) on this important issue and I congratulate him on securing

[*Matt Rodda*]

the debate. I want to speak briefly in support of the hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) and also my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), and make two points.

The first point is about the sheer proliferation of HMOs in urban Britain today. In my experience as a former councillor and now as an MP for a town in the country some way from London, the scale is quite significant and might not be fully recognised by all colleagues. Some 28% of the housing in Reading is now privately rented, and a significant proportion are HMOs. The typical issues that we face in our town may well be familiar to colleagues representing similar sorts of towns with similar street layouts. We have a lot of Victorian and 1920s housing. We have a limited amount of street space for parking—it is not like a rural area, with driveways or land at the side of buildings. One of the big challenges that we face—I suspect that other hon. Members may face it in their constituencies—is the sheer volume of cars generated by HMOs, in what are already densely populated areas.

The second serious and practical problem is the large number of additional refuse bins that are created. That might sound like a mundane matter, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North pointed out, a sudden change in the housing ownership on a quiet street can dramatically alter its appearance. It can be quite disturbing for local residents to suddenly see large numbers of new bins popping up in front gardens and large numbers of cars. The other issue is that many small front gardens become overgrown and much less attractive. It can be quite a dramatic change for residents who are used to living in a settled urban environment—and who are often from a range of age groups, from young couples and single people to elderly people—to suddenly have a proliferation of very often temporary residents who are unable to stay in the area for long and, as a result, unfortunately unable to put down roots.

I would also like to speak up for the residents in HMOs and to consider things from their perspective, because part of the issue is the wider lack of housing supply in the country, particularly in hotspot areas. I do not know about Northampton, but I suspect that, like us, it may face a chronic lack of housing. Part of the problem is that there is just not enough affordable housing for young people and people moving into these areas. Although this is not quite at the rates found in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North, I know someone who recently had to pay £300,000 for a two-bedroom terraced house in Reading town centre. That is pretty expensive. What we really need is more affordable housing to buy and more affordable council housing to rent.

I urge the Government to look into this. The article 4 directions offer some ability for local councils to intervene, but they are wholly inadequate. If the Minister can comment on that and suggest ways of enhancing legislation, I will be extremely grateful.

4.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) on securing this important debate. I welcome the wide-ranging discussion and recognise many of the concerns about the impact of houses in multiple occupation, or HMOs, in certain areas.

I thought it would be helpful if I set out clearly the wide range of housing and planning controls that exist to control both the creation and operation of HMOs. I hope this will demonstrate that local authorities have an effective array of tools to ensure that any adverse impacts from HMOs can be properly addressed. Before discussing those controls in detail, it is important to acknowledge the wider context: the pressing national need to increase the supply of all types of housing.

As we set out in the housing White Paper, the Government are determined to boost the supply of housing and, over the longer term, create a more efficient housing market where outcomes more closely match the needs of all households. Our actions are already delivering success. Since 2010, we have delivered more than 357,000 new affordable homes, and around one quarter of them are in London.

The Prime Minister recently announced an additional £2 billion funding for affordable housing, which will increase the affordable homes programme budget to over £9 billion. The new funding will support councils and housing associations to build more affordable homes where they are needed most—where families are struggling with rental costs, and some are at risk of homelessness. But there is more to do.

The Government recently published a revision of the national planning policy framework for consultation, which implements around 80 reforms announced last year. It will ensure that planning remains locally led and that all local communities get the homes and infrastructure they need. It represents an ambitious step forward in our aim to tackle the housing crisis by bringing forward more land for housing in the right places. The consultation runs until 10 May at 11.45, that is 23.45—

Stephen Pound: A quarter to midnight!

Mrs Wheeler: At 23.45.

Subject to being properly planned, constructed and managed, the provision of additional HMOs can make a small but important contribution to housing supply in some areas. That is particularly true for those entering the market for the first time.

One final point of introduction: hon. Members will appreciate that because of the Secretary of State's role in the planning process, I cannot comment on specific cases raised today. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman that my comments will therefore cover the issues in general. I hope, none the less, to reassure hon. Members that the Government take proper control of HMOs seriously.

HMOs play an important role in the private rented sector. They provide a cheaper alternative to other private rented accommodation and flexibility. However, they sometimes pose greater management challenges than single household accommodation. That is why mandatory licensing of HMOs was introduced in 2004 for properties with three or more storeys that are occupied by five or more people. Since its introduction over a decade ago, it has been successful in raising standards and enabling local authorities to tackle overcrowded conditions and poor management practices. However,

significant growth in the private rented sector means that some smaller properties are being converted for use as HMOs. Those HMOs do not legally require a licence at the minute, and there are sometimes problems with standards. To address that, we are extending mandatory licensing, which we expect to come into force in October 2018.

I am sure you will be pleased to hear, Mr Hanson, that the extended scope of mandatory HMO licensing will cover properties where five or more unrelated tenants share facilities, regardless of the number of floors in the building. We are also creating two new mandatory HMO licence conditions: national minimum sizes for rooms used as sleeping accommodation, and a requirement to comply with council refuse schemes.

Gareth Snell: As the Minister is outlining things that the Government are looking to do, would they be willing to consider a saturation limit? As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) said, the issue is not necessarily the numbers, but the concentration in certain areas. If the Government were able to entertain that, I am sure she would find cross-party support.

Mrs Wheeler: There is not, in fact, a limit on the number of HMO licences a local housing authority can issue, so it can deal with it that way.

Good management of HMOs is important. Before a local housing authority can issue a licence, it must be satisfied that the proposed licence holder or landlord is a fit and proper person. It has to ensure that the landlord has no unspent convictions, has not carried out unlawful discrimination and is not in contravention of housing or landlord and tenant law.

Local authorities have the powers that they need to impose conditions on how landlords manage these properties, and to ensure that they do not cause overcrowding. Conditions can also be included to ensure that landlords maintain the upkeep of properties. The conditions can also make them responsible for such things as antisocial behaviour committed by their tenants. A breach of a licence condition is a criminal offence and a licence holder can receive a substantial fine if convicted. Repeated or substantial breaches of a condition can also result in the licence being revoked. That is a significant penalty.

Licensing HMO properties strengthens a local authority's enforcement capacity. They have strong powers in the Housing Act 2004 to tackle poor property conditions and overcrowding in HMOs. They can serve improvement notices requiring landlords to carry out works to remedy poor conditions or make prohibition orders to prevent overcrowding. In the most serious cases, where the health and safety of tenants and their families is at significant risk, local authorities are under a duty to take action to combat the problem.

Landlords who fail to comply with an improvement notice or prohibition order are committing a criminal offence. Indeed, failure to apply for a licence is also a criminal offence. We have gone further in tackling rogue landlords by introducing new powers in the Housing and Planning Act 2016 that mean that non-compliant landlords can face a civil penalty of up to £30,000. Furthermore, we have enabled local authorities to keep the income from such fines to support their enforcement capacity.

Ealing, specifically, has been proactive in licensing smaller HMOs by introducing an additional licensing scheme in 2017 to cover HMOs occupied by four people or more. Ealing has gone further in using licensing to raise standards in the sector. It has also introduced selective licensing, which allows it to license all private rented properties in specific parts east of the borough. That is with a view to driving improvements in the quality and management of such properties. Ealing has also previously been successful in securing additional financial support under our rogue landlord funding. Through that, it has carried out more than 1,500 inspections and 30 raids in partnership with the UK Border Agency.

However, I recognise that HMO accommodation can sometimes lead to problems for local residents who live in the vicinity. Many of the problems arise from the intensification of the use of the property. If there is a concentration of HMOs, the cumulative impact can affect neighbours' amenities. The planning system also has a role to play in controlling such development. Permitted development rights allow a family house to be changed to a small house in multiple occupation for up to six people sharing facilities without a planning application. Where neighbours have concerns, they can alert the planning authority. It is then for the planning authority to determine whether the works are lawful, and if not what, if any, action to take.

I will get to article 4, but I am concerned about the time because the hon. Gentleman probably wants to respond.

Stephen Pound *indicated dissent.*

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Gentleman does not? That is really kind; I thank him.

I will talk more about enforcement. A landlord who deliberately rents out a house to more than six individuals would be in breach of planning control if they had not obtained planning permission from the local planning authority, so it could take enforcement action.

The Government believe that it is important to tackle breaches of planning control that would have an unacceptable impact on the amenity of an area. Local planning authorities already have a wide range of strong enforcement powers to do so. However, enforcement action can be taken only when a breach has occurred. It cannot be taken in anticipation of a likely breach; although, where a local authority considers that an unauthorised development is likely to occur, it can apply for an injunction to prevent that from happening.

Making full and effective use of all the available powers can also act as a deterrent. Taking action against the unlawful development of houses in multiple occupation in a targeted area, combined with licensing and building regulation enforcement if necessary, can send a strong message to other rogue developers and landlords that they will not be tolerated. However, it is up to planning authorities when and how they use these powers. I am encouraged to learn that the hon. Gentleman recently met the chief planner of Ealing London Borough Council to discuss the local issue. It is best placed to undertake these investigations.

To conclude, I hope that hon. Members are convinced that there are rigorous powers available to local authorities to ensure the control and management of HMOs.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

UK-EU: International Development

4.30 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK's future relationship with the EU on international development.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the Minister for being here to respond to the debate, and hon. Members from across the House who have joined me for this important discussion.

This is the first Westminster Hall debate that I have secured, and I am proud to have done so on such a key issue. The UK's future international development work will play a pivotal role in the lives of millions of the world's poorest people. We cannot allow Brexit to undo the good work that we have achieved through overseas aid.

Before my election to the House, I ran a hospital and a community health programme in Uganda, on the edge of the Bwindi impenetrable forest, for almost five years. It offered HIV, malaria, and maternal and child health services to local communities. I have seen at first hand the difference that development programmes can make. We should be incredibly proud of the work that the UK and the EU do to save lives and end poverty around the world. We should also be proud of our continued commitment to spend 0.7% of national income on overseas aid.

I called for this debate because we are at a crucial crossroads in the discussions about Brexit. In the next six months, the second phase of talks must agree what our future relationship with the EU will look like. Just as crucially, at the same time, the EU's multi-annual financial framework—its budget—for 2021 to 2027 is under discussion.

Many questions remain unanswered. So much is still unknown and so little time remains. It is therefore right that this House should have a serious say in what the UK is trying to achieve, as well as on our negotiating position to get there. We have had very few opportunities so far to do that, so I welcome today's debate.

I will talk about four key points: first, the impact of this vital work, and the many lives we already save and improve; secondly, the importance of working together with the EU to achieve greater efficiency and to add value to what we do; thirdly, the recognition that the UK is a world leader on development—we punch well above our weight and it is important to continue to provide that leadership; fourthly, the acknowledgement that other options and partnerships simply will not match up to what we can already offer. There is much at stake. Our future relationship with the EU on international development matters.

First, and perhaps most critically, the impact of this work is such that the lives of the world's poorest and most marginalised populations depend on our getting it right. We must get the greatest impact and value for money out of every pound of the UK's aid budget. If we do not, we will deliver fewer life-saving vaccinations, put fewer girls in schools and save fewer refugees from sexual violence.

In 2016, £1.5 billion—11% of our total official development assistance budget—was delivered through the EU budget and the European development fund.

After decades of working with the EU, we know that it is one of the most effective delivery channels for spending taxpayers' money to help the world's poorest. Hon. Members do not need to take my word for that: in the Government's multilateral aid review, the European Commission's development and humanitarian programmes were assessed as "very good" in terms of matching UK development objectives, and "good" in terms of their organisational strengths. When the Ebola crisis happened, with leadership from the Department for International Development, member states worked together. By pooling resources, they could provide a much more effective response on the ground.

Secondly, partnership working with the EU allows DFID to improve where and how it works, and to help more of the world's poorest. It has been said that every £1 of aid the UK spends through EU institutions is matched by £6 from other member states. The EU has operations in 120 of the world's countries. Our partnership enables our aid budget to reach and respond in a far higher number of countries than we could ever achieve by working alone—often in places that other partnerships simply do not reach.

Anybody who, like me, has worked in international development or humanitarian response will say how important co-ordination on the ground is in responding to an emerging situation. The EU is a crucial in-country co-ordination mechanism for European donors to quickly share information and make decisions, so we must find a way to keep a seat at that table. By pooling resources and expertise with the EU and with European donors, DFID can tackle, at scale, much bigger crises than it could by itself.

Thirdly, our financial commitments to EU development and humanitarian programmes grant the UK enormous access and influence over international development globally. In 2016, EU nations spent more than €75 billion on official development assistance, but that figure could and should be higher. The UK and others led the way by spending 0.7% of gross national income on development assistance, but many countries do not. We must persuade those who are still falling short to raise their game, but we can do so only if they listen to us.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am loth to interrupt my hon. Friend's passionate speech, but he mentioned 2016 and I wondered if he had seen the International Development Committee's report of that year. It points out that the Government should

"consider the ramifications of the UK's exit on the laws and regulations designed to curb corruption both here and overseas".

Anti-corruption was not one of his four pillars, but the report said that it should not be de-prioritised. Yet when the Government's anti-corruption strategy came out in December, there was no mention of this. Is he as disturbed as I am by that gaping hole?

Dr Williams: I did not choose to talk about corruption, but my hon. Friend raises an important point. To ensure that our aid is spent effectively, and, perhaps more importantly, to maintain public confidence in the fact that we give 0.7% of national income to official development assistance, we have to work in any way we can, and with many partnerships, to root out corruption.

DFID is widely perceived as one of the top aid agencies, which raises the standard of aid effectiveness and transparency in Europe and around the world.

It has a seat in Cabinet and it is supported by deep technical expertise. Many European partners do not have that, which means that it is often able to set the standard, raise the bar, and promote important principles, such as poverty reduction and the untying of aid.

Despite the key role we play in the EU's international development, we would be naïve to think that we could achieve just as much by going it alone. To withdraw from EU development and humanitarian programmes would be a mistake. Large proportions of the money we invest on the ground to help the world's poorest would be likely to be swallowed up by the creation of costly administrative systems to distribute those funds outside existing structures.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Nigeria. The aims of our aid programmes and of the EU's in that country are quite well aligned. How does the hon. Gentleman see that continuing? What happens when, as in central and eastern Europe, those aims diverge? The EU's efforts in that area fell behind.

Dr Williams: I hope the Minister will tell us how we will continue to have influence and form partnerships that are in our interest. By working together on the ground, we can ensure that our aid spend is doubly effective.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing his first Westminster Hall debate on this very important subject. Does he agree that the scale and size of the UK's contribution to international aid helps to mitigate some of his concerns? The big part that the UK plays in international aid will give us an important role on the world stage.

Dr Williams: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. Together with our EU partners, we are the world's largest donor, but if we are alone we will fall down the pecking order. At least some of our influence comes from working with EU partners, but I concede that our role and our leadership as a stand-alone player are still very important.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making very good progress. Does he agree that it is not just money that is important to our influence in the EU? In the final stages of the sustainable development goal negotiations, there were four actors around the table: the EU, the US, the G77 and the co-chairs. Is there not a risk that if we do not come to an agreement with the EU, we will lose a seat in some of the informal negotiations that shape development policy?

Dr Williams: I thank my hon. Friend for that wise intervention. Yes, there is a risk that we will lose much of our influence if we do not get this right.

My final point is that we need to think seriously about what kind of country we want to become. The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs recently warned that the rhetoric of "global Britain" risks becoming nothing more than a slogan. Just a fortnight ago, DFID signed a controversial new humanitarian partnership with Saudi Arabia, despite what it is doing to put 8.4 million people in Yemen at risk of famine. When we

form the wrong alliances, it could spell disaster for development. Some may say that we could form aid partnerships with nations such as the United States, but that would put our existing work at risk, especially in the light of the President's Executive order that brings back the so-called global gag rule. We could find our ongoing progress on sexual health and reproductive rights held back by others' beliefs.

Our partnership with the EU must surely be one of our top priorities. Given what is at stake and the risks of getting it wrong, we cannot afford to treat our humanitarian partnership as a bargaining chip in Brexit negotiations. The impact of our contributions on millions of lives and the amplification that they give to DFID are far too important to sacrifice in Brexit negotiations. I hope that today we will have a chance to put party politics aside and restate what I believe is a widespread commitment to moving forward with an ambitious and substantive partnership with the EU on international development.

To move forward, we need to fully understand the Government's position, so I hope the Minister will paint a clearer picture of it today. In September, the Government published an ambiguous Brexit position paper, "Foreign policy, defence and development", that made a commitment to an ambitious international development partnership with the EU. Six months on, however, the details are still lacking. Just weeks ago, DFID published a new paper that suggested that the UK will seek flexible engagement with different funds. It says that we will continue to seek influence and a seat at the table wherever we can—hardly a clear or compelling vision. Surely the public, our EU partners, non-governmental organisations and developing nations deserve more clarity than that.

I ask the Minister to provide some clarity by answering the following questions. What EU funds do the Government want to contribute to? Will the Government continue making contributions to the central EU budget, or only to ring-fenced funds outside it? Will they actively push for the European development fund to remain independent, ring-fenced and outside the scope of the central EU budget? I understand that that is far from certain. What influence would we need to secure from the EU in order to consider the negotiations to have been successful? What exact plans is DFID making for a no-deal scenario?

Tamsyn Barton, the chief executive of the UK international development network, Bond—British Overseas NGOs for Development—has already warned that DFID runs the risk that the EU will see it as cherry-picking. The Government's new paper also urges so-called creative thinking. I hope that our negotiations in this important area of humanitarianism will not suffer from the same negotiating weaknesses that we have seen elsewhere.

I hope that this debate will be just the beginning of a meaningful discussion on the future of the UK-EU international development partnership. Questions remain about how Parliament will have a say on this crucial topic in the future and about how we will exercise real scrutiny over the Government's position. The UK has collaborated with the EU for decades, with shared goals and values, to eliminate hunger, poverty, disease and inequality and to tackle conflict and crisis at scale. That partnership is too important to risk. We must now get on with the business of making sure that we preserve it once we leave the European Union.

4.45 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again this week, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) on securing this important debate on an important subject.

International development has been one of the UK Government's great success stories, as the hon. Gentleman recognises. We have met our commitment to spending 0.7% of gross national income on overseas aid; we are one of just seven countries in the world to do so. Working bilaterally and multilaterally, we have made progress towards reaching the 2030 global goals. That success is to be applauded, and I have every confidence that it will continue after Brexit, when the £1.5 billion—11% of our overseas aid spending—that we currently funnel through the EU's development programmes comes under our control.

Of course, if we are to maintain our 0.7% target, we must continue to spend that money on overseas aid, but we do not have to spend it all in the same way. Arguably, the EU still sends too much of its aid to middle-income countries that benefit either from being candidates for accession or simply from being near the EU. In 2016, for instance, the top five beneficiaries of overseas aid from EU institutions were Turkey, Morocco, Ukraine, Serbia and Tunisia, all of which are very much middle-income countries.

One of this Conservative Government's great achievements in aid is the rigour that we have brought to the Department for International Development, which ensures that UK aid is spent as wisely and effectively as possible. I look forward to the aid that we funnel through the EU being subjected to the same focus. It is important to note that a lot of EU overseas aid work is excellent and helps some of the world's poorest people, but it also benefits middle-income countries, as I said.

Britain, the EU, other developed economies and organisations such as the UN are all in the same fight to eradicate poverty and hunger and build a better world. As the hon. Gentleman said, there are cases in which multilateral aid—whether given through the UN, through another global organisation or through the EU—maximises the impact of our aid money and helps it to reach places and people that we could not reach alone. We should therefore be willing to continue working and co-operating with the EU on certain international development projects that we deem appropriate. I hope that the UK Government will express that wish to EU leaders as we negotiate Brexit and as the EU formulates its post-2020 overseas aid policy. If the EU puts our common goal of a poverty-free world first, it should accept our willingness to join in with some projects.

I am optimistic about the future of our international development policy. As the hon. Gentleman recognises, Britain can hold its head high: we have a proud record of giving significantly more money than most EU states. I hope we will get the control we need to ensure that our money is spent in the best way possible, while leaving the door open to co-operation with the EU where it is best not just for us and the EU, but for the world as a whole.

4.49 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Hanson, for calling me to speak. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South

(Dr Williams) for securing this debate, which is very important. Hopefully it will spur on the International Development Committee, which I sit on, to expedite its planned inquiry into this issue.

I will briefly touch on a number of issues, which supplement those that have already been raised, and which are particularly about the co-ordination of non-governmental organisations. At the moment, Britain and London are one of the leading hubs for NGOs and aid organisations around the world. Those organisations receive a number of substantial grants, from not only the British Government but the European Union, and they receive them because they have their headquarters or administrative offices in the European Union.

One thing we must ensure in any leaving of the EU is that we do not disadvantage NGOs that have decided to base themselves in Britain—very often because the British people have been so generous historically in supporting international development. We not only have Oxfam in Oxford, of course, but this city—London—is a leader for international development. Having a commitment that the Government will not only continue to support these NGOs from Government funds but go and bat for the NGO sector so that these NGOs are eligible for EU funds, even if their registered address is in London, will be vital to ensure that they continue their co-ordinated work. I hope that the Government will make a commitment on that.

On visits with many hon. Friends, I have seen how co-ordination on the ground is so important. Often, one of the big players—in other words, the EU or the United States Agency for International Development—takes a co-ordinating role between Government donors in countries, and Britain has often stepped up to co-ordinate EU efforts. Sierra Leone is one good example of that. Making sure that Britain is able to take the lead in co-ordinating Government efforts in-country, whether we are part of the EU or we have a memorandum of understanding with it, will be really important in ensuring that we continue battling like that.

The other thing I want to raise is the 2019 report to the high-level political forum. I welcome the fact that the Government themselves will report to that forum, which evaluates the sustainable development goals, but the EU will also report to it in the same year. How the Government feed into that report—feeding in the good work that Britain does—will be important, because it is international frameworks that help to leverage our money so that we have a bigger bang for our buck. However, if the EU report does not include British priorities, there is a danger that our voice will be diminished on the international stage. It would be really good to hear from the Minister on some of those issues.

I will finish by saying that very often, in my experience of international development diplomacy, and as I mentioned previously, it has been the EU that has led and co-ordinated, and it has been Britain within the EU that has helped to push the EU to be a leader in certain areas. I wonder whether the Government have had any significant discussions about how they will continue to play a leading role in “EU-plus”—I say “plus” because we will not be in the EU—co-ordination in New York when we are involved in these important negotiations. I ask that because there is a real danger, when we leave the EU, that if we do not have an arrangement with the EU to negotiate jointly with it, we will just not be “in the room”.

I leave Members with one anecdote. I was in the negotiations that set up the HLPF, and I remember that we went off into a small room. It was, as I mentioned earlier, the US, the EU and a few other big players. At the end of the negotiations, we had worked out a deal, but Switzerland came and said, “We’re not happy with that deal. We don’t like it.” The chairman turned around to Switzerland and said, “Well, I’m sorry, Switzerland. You’re not one of the big development players. You have a choice: you can either put up or you can shut up, but we are not changing our negotiated position now. You can vote against it and let the whole thing fail, and you will be the pariah of the world.” Switzerland decided to shut up and live with the negotiated text, which it was not quite happy with. There is a real danger that if we do not ensure that we leverage work with our partners in the US and the EU, we will become a poor relation, as Switzerland was on that night of the negotiations.

David Hanson (in the Chair): We now move to the Front-Bench winding-up speeches. Given where we are now, I suggest that both Front-Bench Members take up to a maximum of 10 minutes each, and then I will call the Minister.

4.54 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): As ever, Mr Hanson, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. It is also a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), who gave a very powerful speech, and to congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams), not only on securing the debate—I am glad that it is happening today, although unfortunately it is quite short, and I hope to hear more debates like it in the future—but on his incredible work in Uganda, which I am glad he told us all about.

The UK has a long history of working with European Union partners to help some of the world’s most vulnerable nations, and figures indicate that around 11% of our aid budget is channelled through the European Commission. However, serious choices for this Government lie ahead about whether and how to co-operate with the various development institutions of the EU after Brexit, and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to the debate.

The Scottish National party wants to see the closest possible relationship with the EU in relation to international development. Close co-operation with our European partners has had a hugely beneficial impact, not just here in Europe in terms of our relationships, but in the world, and it has allowed us to raise, pool and co-ordinate aid and expertise.

Working with others is essential for solving many of the world’s biggest problems, including achieving gender equality, tackling tax avoidance, using diplomacy to end conflict and promote peace, and, of course, tackling the devastating impact of climate change—fragile states are hit the hardest and have the fewest resources to cope with climate change impacts.

The EU functions as a bloc within the UN framework convention on climate change, with the UK as a leading member. After Brexit, if the UK does not maintain a close relationship with the EU, our influence on global environmental and climate change policies, which affect everyone, will be significantly reduced, and the world will be a whole lot worse off for it.

At present, many UK non-governmental organisations receive funding from the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations Directorate. Post-Brexit, they will not be able to apply for any of those funds, and they are already finding that grant applications are no longer being accepted. This situation undermines the global capacity to respond effectively to natural disasters, which is something that UK NGOs are among the best in the world at, including in terms of humanitarian recovery. All of us involved in this debate should be proud of that. However, we must make sure that Brexit does not impact the funding of those NGOs. Again, I would like to hear what the Minister has to say on that point.

After we, sadly, leave the EU—I have to say “sadly”—some will undoubtedly want aid funds to be reallocated away from foreign aid and into domestic expenditure. Can we be clear today what we are talking about here? UK aid alleviates suffering in some of the most climate-vulnerable, poverty-stricken and war-torn countries in the world. UK Government domestic expenditure policies—most notably austerity policies—are causing poverty and inequality in this country. That is a political choice and not an economic one, and it is one that the SNP does not support. We should not let these two things become conflicted.

As the UK remains committed to the 0.7% of gross national income aid target, funds that were previously channelled through EU international development activities will be reallocated to other foreign aid-related activities. However, there has recently been an alarming shift in the focus of the UK aid strategy, with increasing importance being attached to the promotion of the UK’s national interest. A key mechanism for achieving that has been to direct the aid budget away from the Department for International Development to other Departments, such as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence. Let me be crystal clear: the foreign aid budget should never be used for defence, and this development appears to be a clear attempt to dilute our efforts to achieve our No.1 goal in giving aid, which is to fight extreme poverty.

Not only that, but the International Development Secretary previously pledged to use Britain’s aid as part of “a bold new Brexit-ready proposition to boost trade and investment with developing countries”.

It is concerning that UK aid could be used to mitigate the negative impacts of Brexit, with the UK’s security and prosperity becoming key factors in deciding how aid is spent. This direction of travel will reduce the focus on global poverty alleviation, as well as raising concerns about the transparency and accountability of aid spending outside DFID.

It is well known that Brexit will have a huge impact on the UK, but if unchecked it will also have significant repercussions on the world’s poorest people. It is vital that the UK and the EU continue to support harmonised responses and co-ordinated action to humanitarian crises. The SNP will continue to urge the Government to prioritise international development as a key dimension of our global contribution to the international community—something that all of us in this room are proud of—informed by core values of fairness and equality.

International development is about being a good global citizen, which can be accomplished only through effective international collaboration. That is why the UK Government should seek the closest possible co-operation with our European partners.

5 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) on securing this important debate. He spoke passionately and persuasively about what is at stake in our future relationship with the EU, and why we must get it right. We have heard a number of particularly useful contributions and points, which have been made forcefully. It is testament to how important this topic is that we would all benefit from additional time.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) and the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) for their contributions. I also thank the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), who talked about the importance of working with EU partners, my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), who reminded us that we should not disadvantage non-governmental organisations based in London when leaving the EU, given the work that they do, and the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who talked about the importance of our relationship with the EU, and the impact on our global capacity to respond to natural disasters if funding streams are not available to the sector.

We have heard today how important it is for the Government to lay out a clear and unambiguous position on what we want from a future relationship with the EU. That simply has not happened yet. We have a Government position paper from September, but it is remarkable only for its ambiguity. As of the end of February, we now also have the so-called “non-paper” that sets out the UK perspective on development instruments for the 2021-27 general EU budget. It provides a little more detail, but it runs the risk of the Government again wanting to cherry-pick, have our cake and eat it, and demand more “creative thinking” from the EU to solve the Government’s lack of imagination and focus.

We have heard today that our humanitarian and development partnership with the EU is too important, and has too great an impact on the lives of the world’s poorest people, to warrant dragging our feet, or sliding into a snail’s pace of negotiation. I believe that the House has heard loudly and clearly that decisions over future funding contributions to the EU must be guided not by short-term political horse-trading, but by their impact on the lives of the world’s poorest.

We must not allow the lives that are at stake to become simply a bargaining chip. We have heard today from Members that, although not perfect, EU development and humanitarian programmes are well proven as an effective, value-for-money, delivery channel for the UK. They have scored very highly in our own multilateral aid review, and they allow us to pool resources and expertise, to co-ordinate better on the ground, to reach a greater number of countries, to take to scale what we do, and to influence how more than €75 billion worth of aid funding is spent. That translates into real lives saved, real girls put in school, and real crises averted.

There is a groundswell of support for the UK remaining progressive, outward-looking, generous and a global leader on international development once we leave the European Union. We must not turn inwards. We must not abandon our partnership with Europe, even as we

leave the European Union. I hope that the Minister will not give credence to those who disingenuously say they want to take back control of the aid budget from Brussels, only to stop spending it on helping the world’s poorest.

The Government now need to make up for lost time, set out an ambitious, bold, clear vision, and get on with it. There are just weeks and months to do that, and the clock is ticking. As we do that, it cannot just be the Government talking to themselves. We need to hear the voices of civil society, and of people in the global south who will be affected. We need to hear the voices of the organisations that know the EU’s development and humanitarian programmes best, and that understand the impact that decisions will have. We need to hear the voices of the thousands of international development workers whose jobs in the UK are at risk.

We also need to hear the voice of Parliament, and ensure that there is proper space and time given for Members to scrutinise the Government’s vision, debate it, and shape it. That must be much more than one Westminster Hall debate, which we are having thanks only to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South, who forced it. I hope that the Minister will commit to significantly expanding the space for future debate on this topic in the coming weeks, because so far it has been woefully insufficient.

Our future relationship with the EU is simply too important to fail, and we need to get on with ensuring that it does not. I thank all hon. Members for their excellent contributions, and look forward to the Minister’s remarks.

5.4 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) on securing the first Westminster Hall debate on such an important topic. I pay tribute to his work in Uganda prior to coming to this place. It demonstrates the incredible value that people with such experience bring to our Parliament—I wanted to put that on the record.

Today’s debate could not be more timely, because on Monday we reached a milestone in terms of publishing progress on the transition of our relationship with Brussels, including the important work that we do alongside the EU in helping the world’s poorest. I echo the vision that the Prime Minister outlined in her Munich speech: we very much want the European Union to succeed after the UK has left, because that is in all our interests, and we are seeking the broadest and deepest possible partnership with the EU.

The UK will remain one of the largest development spenders and influencers in the world, as will the European Union, and we want to retain a close partnership in this area in the future. We share the same concerns, the same values, and the same commitment to the sustainable development goals, to the Paris climate change agenda, and of course to the Addis Ababa agreement on financing for development.

In UK law, we have legally entrenched our commitment to spending 0.7% of our gross national income on international development—spending that I assure hon. Members is strictly controlled by the overseas development assistance guidelines set out by the OECD. Of course, we will continue to want to work alongside the EU on

new and innovative approaches for financing the incredibly important agenda of moving the billions that are spent on aid to the trillions needed to move countries out of a situation where so many people live in poverty. It is worth putting on the record that the UK is one of only five EU countries that meet the target of 0.7%, which was a United Nations resolution of many years ago. We are proud of being one of those five countries. Across the EU as a whole, the average is just 0.3%.

The UK's development priorities are closely aligned with the EU's. As is often said, that is because we have had considerable influence in shaping them during our membership of the EU. Our approaches to addressing the root causes of migration, for example, or to meeting humanitarian needs from the outset in a way that prepares for longer-term crises, and puts in place advance readiness for long-term crisis responses, are very much based on our common experiences and joint shaping of best practice in development programming. I was pleased to hear so many hon. Members acknowledge the UK's leadership in this area.

It is very much in the UK and the EU's interest that we work coherently together in the future in response to specific crises overseas, and continue to help the world's most vulnerable. Good examples are our responses in Somalia and in the Sahel—two areas where we have joint interests in addressing the causes of conflict, and the development and humanitarian needs that arise.

It will also be important to continue to support each other where we agree on policy priorities, for example on our human rights stance at the United Nations—it is absolutely essential that we remain united on that—and at a country level. Where we hold shared commitments and objectives, it is in our mutual interest to find ways to continue working together on a case-by-case basis, to ensure that we can collectively draw on expertise and lessons learned, to achieve our global development objectives and to deliver the best value for money.

We published a future partnership paper in September, which set out our desire for future co-operation with the EU, that goes well beyond the existing third-country arrangements. We look forward to formal discussions as soon as the European Commission is ready to engage.

We have committed to meeting our financial obligations already made, during the period while we are a member, and we will continue to pay into the European development fund and other EU instruments until December 2020 when the implementation period ends. As good development donors, we will continue to honour all our commitments to the world's poorest and to shape how those funds are spent through all the means available to us.

While we have clearly signalled to the EU our openness to a future partnership on development, the extent and depth of such a partnership will be contingent upon the current discussions between the European Commission and member states about how the EU will finance its international development after 2020. Colleagues will be aware that most of the EU's development finance instruments do not allow participation from non-member states. They may also be aware that the Cotonou agreement on development, trade and political co-operation between the EU and the 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries is shortly to expire and that the EU is currently rethinking how it will finance development in the future.

A flexible, open and responsive EU is very much in everyone's interests. For example, in deciding to open its migration trust fund to non-EU partners, the EU was able to respond swiftly and effectively to large-scale crises, working with the right partners in the right places, particularly, for example, in the horn of Africa and north Africa, where we have joint interests now and for the future. The EU's humanitarian agency, ECHO, has shown flexibility to third-party participation in the Sahel, where the EU is the lead humanitarian donor and has a strong field presence. That has allowed key partners to boost the collective effort and coalesce around a flexible but co-ordinated approach in a region of strategic importance to both the EU and the UK.

We encourage the EU to design a new set of development instruments that builds on the positive examples of the last few years and creates an open and flexible enabling framework, within which it can work with its partners to tackle global challenges and build a secure, stable and prosperous world. We envisage that holding the development financing instruments open to third parties would enable the UK to work through the EU on a case-by-case basis, where we judge our development impact would be amplified. We have not yet made any decisions on that, and whether we actually pay in will be contingent on the kind of EU exit agreement that we finally secure.

While we remain a member state, we are fully engaged in discussions around the successor to the Cotonou agreement and on the shape of the future financial instruments, from a strategic perspective of what makes best development sense, and with a view to what will allow greatest flexibility for potential UK participation in the future. However, there would of course be certain expectations attached to any future partnership. If we opt into EU programmes when that is the most effective way to deliver our mutual objectives, we would expect to engage with the EU at a strategic level on programme direction and would need to be assured of adequate governance arrangements to allow us to track and account for our spending and the results we deliver. We are also clear that the UK's world-class development sector should be eligible to implement EU programmes. We are very much fighting that corner.

In spite of all the uncertainty, one thing that is clear: the UK's aid strategy and the Government's manifesto commitments do not change in March 2019, and neither will our unwavering commitment to the world's poorest nor our statutory commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income, in line with the official development assistance rules set by the OECD. We will look to deliver our aid strategy through the best range of possible partnerships open to us. The EU and the UK have policy and programming objectives in common.

Where it makes best sense, we will continue to work closely with the EU on development and to implement the sustainable development goals side by side—the difference is that this time we will work with the EU where we choose to, and where it is in our mutual interest. We will be able to ensure better value for money through that choice and through tracking the impacts of our development spending. We will ensure that we continue to engage with the EU strategically, to direct our UK funds, but also on those global public benefits that we are both deeply committed to, such as global health security or mitigating the impacts of climate change.

[*Harriett Baldwin*]

We have signalled our future direction of co-operation very clearly to our EU counterparts, and we now need them to respond in kind. We have made our position very clear. Both sides now need to work together to make that happen.

5.16 pm

Dr Williams: I thank the Minister for that thorough response and for giving us some more assurance. It is important that we continue to have parliamentary scrutiny as we develop our future relationship with the EU, and I hope that this is not our final opportunity for such discussions.

I thank the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing Central and

Acton (Dr Huq) and for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) for their contributions to the debate. We must continue to find a way to partner with some of the key funds, as the Minister hopes, and we must continue to exert our influence. We are global leaders in international development and we cannot let Brexit affect the world's poorest.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the UK's future relationship with the EU on international development.

5.17 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 21 March 2018

TREASURY

Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): In 2015, the UK became a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The AIIB supports economic growth in Asia and drives up living standards. The UK's membership deepens economic ties with Asia and creates opportunities for British businesses.

At the ninth UK-China economic and financial dialogue in Beijing on 16 December 2017, the Chancellor of the Exchequer signed a contribution agreement with the AIIB, formalising the UK's commitment, made at the previous EFD in 2016, to provide \$50 million USD to the AIIB's special fund for project preparation. This fund provides grant support to low income developing country members of the AIIB to prepare infrastructure projects for the bank to finance. China and the Republic of Korea have committed \$50 million USD and \$8 million USD, respectively, and the fund is open for more contributions.

The contribution agreement states that the UK will make four equal payments of \$12.5 million USD by the end of March in 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 respectively. The UK's contribution to the special fund will score as 100% official development assistance (ODA) as projects using UK money will only take place in low-income countries.

HM Treasury will make these payments, and any future payments to the AIIB, under the powers of the International Development Act 2002. The first payment will be made before the end of March.

[HCWS573]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Workforce

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The Government are committed to the delivery of world-class public services, and ensuring that public sector workers are fairly remunerated for the vitally important work that they do.

Public sector pay restraint was necessary to tackle the deficit left by the last Government. However, in September last year we ended the 1% pay award policy for public sector workforces, recognising that some flexibility would be required in certain areas, including in return for improvements to public sector productivity. There is still of course a need for fiscal restraint—our debt is the highest it has been in 50 years, and it is not fair to pass an increasing burden of debt onto future generations.

As a result of constructive dialogue over recent months, I am today announcing that I have agreed to NHS Employers and the NHS trade unions going out to consultation on a three-year pay agreement for NHS staff employed under the "Agenda for Change" pay agreement.

This agreement covers over 1 million staff employed in the NHS excluding employed doctors and very senior managers and is a good example of where public sector employers and unions can work together to agree a pay rise in return for wider reform.

The three-year deal aims to ensure that every pound of the £36 billion pay bill delivers value for and is fair to patients, staff and the taxpayer. It targets recruitment, retention and capacity issues to support staff and help them meet demand within the NHS.

The deal will help ensure the NHS can continue to recruit the skilled compassionate workforce it needs by:

Targeting the greatest pay uplifts at the lowest paid in the NHS, affecting over 100,000 FTE staff, so that the lowest starting salary increases from £15,404 this year to £18,005 in 2020-21, through reform.

Investing in higher starting salaries for staff in every pay band by reforming the pay system to remove overlapping pay points; so a newly qualified nurse will receive starting pay 12.6% (£2,779) higher in 2020-21 than this year and starting pay for a midwife on moving to band 6 will increase by 18.1% (£4,800) as a result of pay band reform.

It will support the retention of staff by:

Guaranteeing fair basic pay awards for the next three years to the 50% of staff who are at the top of pay bands—a cumulative 6.5%.

Guaranteeing fair basic pay awards and faster progression pay for the next three years to the c.50% of staff that is not yet on the top of their pay band.

Through important reforms to pay progression, the deal will help improve staff engagement and ensure that all staff have the knowledge, skills and support to make the greatest possible contribution to patient care.

It will put appraisal and personal development at the heart of pay progression—with virtually automatic incremental pay replaced by larger, less frequent pay increases subject to staff meeting the required standards for their role.

Staff will be supported to develop their skills and competencies and demonstrate that they meet the required standards before moving to the next pay point.

The system will be underpinned by a commitment from employers to fully utilise an effective appraisal process.

The deal will release capacity for provider organisations:

The partners commit to working together to improve the health and wellbeing of NHS staff so as to improve levels of attendance in the NHS with the ambition of matching the best in the public sector. NHS Digital data suggests that latest sickness absence rate for the NHS is 4.13%. For AfC staff, this is estimated at 4.5%. Estimates suggest that a 1% drop in sickness absence could save the NHS £280 million.

Finally, the deal will encourage greater consistency and modernisation of terms and conditions:

New provisions will be agreed to give staff access to consistent child bereavement leave, enhanced shared parental leave (extension of statutory), and a national framework for buying and selling annual leave.

Steps will be taken to ensure that, over time, the calculation for sickness absence pay is the same for all staff.

There will be very modest changes to the value of the higher rates of unsocial hours pay for staff in pay bands 1 to 3 over the period of the multi-year deal to ensure the difference between these staff and all other AfC staff is narrowed over time.

Overall, this pay deal is fair to staff and taxpayers and will help to improve productivity through stronger evidence-based appraisal systems and through that, better staff engagement which we know can help improve outcomes for patients.

At the Budget in November my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that if discussions with health unions on pay structure modernisation for “Agenda for Change” staff were successful, he would protect frontline services by providing additional funding for such a settlement. I can confirm that through autumn Budget 2017, we set aside in the reserves £800 million per annum which funds the first year of the “Agenda for Change” pay deal. If the NHS trade unions accept this agreement following consultation with their members, the Government will release this funding. The Chancellor will provide for additional funding required to fulfil his commitment through the 2018 autumn Budget, and so make available the £4.2 billion over three years needed to fund the deal. This is all part of our balanced approach that keeps debt falling, while investing in our public services and keeping taxes low.

I will also be publishing a draft equality statement to meet my public sector equality duty. A final equality statement will be published when the agreement is implemented.

This agreement will be shared with the independent NHS Pay Review Body and I look forward to its report in due course.

[HCWS574]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Housing Investment

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Today, the Government are announcing that we are now working with a further 44 areas across England to develop projects with the remaining £4.1 billion of the £5 billion housing infrastructure fund, with the potential to deliver over 400,000 homes in areas where housing need is greatest. This is in addition to the west midlands, where housing infrastructure fund funding for co-development was announced as part of a housing package at spring statement. These are strategic, long-term projects which will deliver housing not just for now, but for generations to come—creating new settlements, growing places and backing local authority ambition for growth and regeneration. They follow on from our announcement made on 1 February 2018 to take forward 133 marginal viability fund projects worth £866 million from the housing infrastructure fund to provide infrastructure to unlock up to 200,000 homes. This announcement reinforces our continued commitment to fix the broken housing market and support projects that would otherwise struggle to go ahead or take years for work to begin.

We are committed to helping to create a new generation of strong, vibrant communities where people want to live, work and build families. We are supporting the development of 24 new locally led garden cities, towns and villages, ranging in size from 1,500 new homes to over 40,000 homes. Over half of these settlements will go forward to the next stage of housing infrastructure fund forward funding co-development.

We also want to back places with ambitious plans for new homes where they are needed. Today the Government announce housing packages for Greater Manchester, who will commit to deliver 227,000 homes by 2035, and the west of England, to accelerate annual housing delivery to 7,500 homes over the next three years. Both of these areas will also go forward to the next stage of housing infrastructure fund forward funding co-development. This is in addition to the housing packages agreed with Oxfordshire and the west midlands. The forward funding component of the housing infrastructure fund was available to the uppermost tier of local authorities in England to bid into, with a focus on strategic, high-impact infrastructure projects.

The full area breakdown of successful forward fund projects we will be working with through co-development can be found on the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government website at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-infrastructure-fund>

As this is still a competitive process, success at this stage is not a guarantee of housing infrastructure fund funding. Shortlisted local authorities will submit their final business cases and successful funded bids will be announced from autumn 2018 onwards.

The housing infrastructure fund is divided into two streams:

A marginal viability fund—available to all single and lower tier local authorities in England—to provide a piece of infrastructure funding to get additional sites allocated or existing sites unblocked quickly. Bids have a soft cap of £10 million.

A forward fund—available to the uppermost tier of local authorities in England—for a small number of strategic and high-impact infrastructure projects. Bids have a soft cap of £250 million.

Housing packages are agreements between central and local government, in which local areas agree to build more homes in return for a package of support from Government.

Detail on the housing packages for Greater Manchester, west of England and west midlands can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/housing-deals>

[HCWS572]

Petitions

Wednesday 21 March 2018

OBSERVATIONS

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Raunds Library

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Raunds Library should remain open.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to compel Northamptonshire County Council to ensure that Raunds Library remains open.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tom Pursglove, *Official Report*, 23 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 518.]

[P002114]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock):

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 (the Act) requires all local authorities in England to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. In considering how to deliver this statutory duty, each local authority is responsible for determining, through consultation, the local needs to deliver a modern and efficient library service that meets the requirements of their communities within available resources.

The Act requires the Secretary of State to superintend, and promote the improvement of, the public library service provided by local authorities in England, and to secure the proper discharge by local authorities of the functions in relation to libraries as conferred on them as library authorities. The Department therefore monitors library service changes to support the Secretary of State in the discharge of these functions, and the Act provides the Secretary of State with powers to order a local inquiry if, after careful consideration, there is serious doubt that a local authority is carrying out its statutory duty.

The Government recognise the importance and value of public libraries for all members of the public. Libraries support the transformation of individuals, communities and society as a whole. They provide access to books, opportunities for people to learn and improve, and bring communities together to support integration and tackle loneliness. In addition, they provide practical help and guidance, including for digital skills, literacy, health and wellbeing, and business development.

The Government are therefore committed to helping public libraries in England prosper, including through the support of the development agency for libraries, Arts Council England. In addition, the Government, with the Local Government Association, established the Libraries Taskforce in 2015 to provide leadership and support to public library services in England. The Taskforce has published a range of information and guidance, including toolkits and case studies to assist local authorities and their library service.

In December 2016, the Taskforce published “Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016–2021” that sets out the Taskforce’s vision for public libraries in England. This is endorsed by central and local government and describes how library services in England support and add value to a range of local and national policy priorities, providing practical examples of existing good practice.

The Government recognise that local authorities are seeking to modernise and innovate library services to ensure they remain relevant and meet the changing demands of their communities. Local authorities are encouraged to work with Government and local people to consider the range of options available to deliver a comprehensive and efficient library service and to ensure that it is sustainable for the long term.

Northamptonshire Council Council’s (NCC) Libraries and Information Service has provided a range of community services to local people. This has been delivered through 36 static libraries, a mobile library service, and other digital services and resources. However, NCC carried out a review of its Library and Information Service, and from 20 October 2017 to 13 January 2018 it consulted on three options for the future of the service. NCC has since analysed the consultation responses and recommendations were considered by NCC’s cabinet on 27 February and by the full council on 28 February.

The Department understands that the changes agreed by NCC include the retention of 15 staffed static libraries (eight large and seven medium libraries), with the remaining 21 static libraries, including Raunds library, to either close or become independent libraries (operating outside the Council’s statutory service). NCC has indicated that it will discuss with local community groups the option of these taking over their local libraries, where such interest was shown during the public consultation.

The agreed changes also include the closure of the mobile library service and the intention to extend the current outreach “Library to You” service for library users who find it difficult to access a static library. NCC expects to develop a decommissioning plan and timetable for the changes, to be implemented from 1 April 2018, and an amended library timetable for the libraries remaining in NCC’s statutory service.

With effect from 1 March, following spending controls in place across council services, NCC has revised opening hours at all its libraries across the network, with the intention that they are open for at least three days per week. Raunds library is open for 5 days per week Tuesday to Thursday (inclusive) 10 am to 6 pm, on Saturday between 10 am and 2 pm and on Sunday 11 am to 2 pm.

The Department continues to closely monitor NCC’s library service provision. In response to representations from CILIP, the Secretary of State has written to the Council to confirm that the Department is treating the correspondence as a complaint under section 10(1)(a) of the Act, that NCC is failing to carry out its duties relating to the public library service imposed on it by or under the Act. The complaint will be considered on its merits to decide whether an inquiry is required to determine if the Council is meeting its statutory duty.

It should also be noted that on 9 January 2018 the Secretary of State for the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) announced the appointment of an independent inspector

to better understand whether NCC is complying with its “best value” duty under the Local Government Act 1999—a legal requirement to ensure good governance and effective management of resources. The inspector reported to MHCLG on 15 March 2018 and has concluded that NCC has failed to properly comply with its best value duty.

The Secretary of State for MHCLG is considering whether or not to exercise his powers of intervention under section 15 of the 1999 Act. My Department is engaging with MHCLG to determine whether decisions taken by their Secretary of State have any implications for the consideration of this complaint.

Thrapston Library

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Thrapston Library should remain open.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to compel Northamptonshire County Council to ensure Thrapston Library remains open.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tom Pursglove, *Official Report*, 1 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 1176.]

[P002107]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock):

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 (the Act) requires all local authorities in England to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. In considering how to deliver this statutory duty, each local authority is responsible for determining, through consultation, the local needs to deliver a modern and efficient library service that meets the requirements of their communities within available resources.

The Act requires the Secretary of State to superintend, and promote the improvement of, the public library service provided by local authorities in England, and to secure the proper discharge by local authorities of the functions in relation to libraries as conferred on them as library authorities. The Department therefore monitors library service changes to support the Secretary of State in the discharge of these functions, and the Act provides the Secretary of State with powers to order a local inquiry if, after careful consideration, there is serious doubt that a local authority is carrying out its statutory duty.

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Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 21 March 2018

EDUCATION

Funding Higher Education

The following is an extract from an intervention by the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), during the Westminster Hall debate on funding higher education on 28 February 2018.

Mr Gyimah: I would like to give the hon. Gentleman that reassurance now. He is absolutely right: the widening participation funds—£1,000 out of every £9,000 paid by students in fees—go towards access.

[Official Report, 28 February 2018, Vol. 636, c. 351 WH.]

Letter of correction from Mr Gyimah:

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) during the Westminster Hall debate on funding higher education.

The correct response should have been:

Mr Gyimah: I would like to give the hon. Gentleman that reassurance now. He is absolutely right: the widening participation funds—**£720** out of every £9,000 paid by students in fees—go towards access.

ORAL ANSWERS

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Wednesday 21 March 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	1MC
Funding Higher Education	1MC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Wednesday 28 March 2018**

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Considered in Committee; not amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

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