

**Wednesday
18 April 2018**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 18 April 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

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

CHOGM: Sustainable Development Goals

1. **Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting promotes the sustainable development goals. [904701]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): We will be working with our Commonwealth partners to ensure that we address the global goals by discussion and commitments across all the goals, but particularly those on prosperity, education and global health.

Sarah Jones: Goal 16 of the sustainable development goals includes a commitment to provide legal identity for all by 2030. Is the Secretary of State ashamed that her Government destroyed thousands of landing cards of those arriving from Commonwealth nations and are now trying to throw those people out?

Penny Mordaunt: I should thank the hon. Lady for affording me the opportunity to associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister yesterday. This has been an appalling episode taking place during CHOGM week, and she took the opportunity yesterday to apologise and to provide reassurances to Commonwealth partners as well as to people here. It is important to reiterate that anyone who answered Britain's call all those years ago has the right to remain and call Britain home. The Home Office has, as the hon. Lady knows, put in place new measures to ensure that no one should have any concerns about the process.

12. [904712] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer, particularly on health. Will she rededicate herself to the elimination of malaria, polio and other such diseases across the Commonwealth?

Penny Mordaunt: In my speech last week, I reiterated that programmes on health are one of the best ways that we can use UK aid, providing a win for the developing world and also contributing to our own global health

security. We have made some commitments on malaria during CHOGM, and there will be a malaria summit this evening.

13. [904713] **Dr Paul Williams** (Stockton South) (Lab): Will the Government use CHOGM to give a message to Uganda's President Museveni that, after 32 years in power, he has become a barrier to his country's development and that good governance includes leaving office?

Penny Mordaunt: Clearly, the Foreign Secretary, my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa and other Ministers, will be having bilaterals all week with Commonwealth Heads Government and with their Ministers when those Heads of Government are not attending.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Killer diseases such as malaria are a huge barrier to the attainment of the sustainable development goals. Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming today's malaria summit, which will accelerate global action to tackle this deadly disease, and continue to back and thank the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation?

Penny Mordaunt: The House need take it not from me, but can take it from Bill and Melinda Gates, that this nation has played a huge role. The British public should be immensely proud of the efforts that have been made to combat malaria. It is still a huge problem, particularly in Commonwealth countries, and we are determined to eradicate it.

9. [904709] **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): Tackling climate change is crucial to meeting the SDGs, and we discussed that with the President of Malawi when he visited Parliament yesterday. Is the Secretary of State aware of the letter published by more than 170 faith leaders of a range of religions from across the Commonwealth calling on CHOGM leaders to turn words into action? What leadership is the UK Government showing in achieving the Paris agreement goal of keeping climate change emissions below 1.5° C?

Penny Mordaunt: The Prime Minister of Jamaica referred yesterday to climate change as an existential threat, and he was absolutely right to do so. Prior to CHOGM, we had been working with our Commonwealth partners to work up concrete proposals and commitments, and we have had many meetings this week, including one particularly focused on small island states, which are disproportionately affected by this issue.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I associate myself with what my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) said. I must say that an apology from the Government is not good enough, because we need to look at the wider picture. The Government have threatened to deport the Windrush generation and have extended their hostile environment to Commonwealth citizens who are legally here. They are unable to provide data on how many have been wrongly detained or deported, and they have even destroyed their landing cards. Exactly what kind of signal does that send to our Commonwealth partners? I ask the Secretary of State to raise these issues with the former Home Secretary and tell her that this is not the global Britain that we want to build.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for those comments. Whatever the policy intent, it is quite wrong if it is not delivering the effect that it should in practice—if people are not reassured and cannot get the answers to basic questions, or if the process is moving so slowly that the person is denied access to healthcare, for example. I am pleased that the Home Office has now gripped this issue and is determined to put those wrongs right. The Prime Minister is providing that reassurance, not just in what she said in public yesterday but in the bilaterals that she and I have had with members of the Commonwealth.

Kate Osamor: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. Last week, she set out her new vision for UK aid, saying that it should act as a “shield” against migration. Does she really believe that the British public want to see our aid budget—meant for poverty reduction—being used to prop up her Prime Minister’s hostile environment?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady has misquoted me; I did not say that. Clearly, migration is a very positive thing. The migration that happened with the Windrush, for example, was hugely beneficial to Britain and, I hope, to those individuals, but other issues will be exacerbated if we do not create jobs and prosperity in Africa. I remind the hon. Lady and other Members that thousands of people have lost their lives in transit across the Mediterranean. We need to do more to alleviate poverty in Africa. People should not have to leave their homes, cross the sea via people traffickers and risk their lives in order to survive.

Yemen: Humanitarian Access

2. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to ensure continued humanitarian access into Yemen. [904702]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): The UK has led the call for unhindered humanitarian and commercial access to Yemen, including through the UK co-ordinated Security Council statement of 15 March, the Secretary of State’s visit to Riyadh in December and lobbying from the Prime Minister. DFID is also providing expertise and funding to UN shipping inspectors to facilitate import flows into Yemen.

Nick Smith: Cholera is currently a massive problem in Yemen, so getting medicines in is, of course, crucial. Hodeidah port is still only open on a month by month basis, so what is the Department doing to keep it permanently open?

Alistair Burt: I am conscious of both aspects on the hon. Gentleman’s question. Just the other week, on 3 April, I was in Geneva, where I co-hosted a discussion on cholera with Sir Mark Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary-General for humanitarian affairs. We had a roundtable of all the major agencies involved in dealing with the cholera outbreak, including the World Health Organisation and others. We are doing as much as we can to encourage preparation for dealing with that outbreak. Of course, we continue to work on ensuring that there is as much access as possible through any of

the ports, although the hon. Gentleman is right that the lack of commercial shipping now coming into Hodeidah by choice is an extra burden.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given the scale of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, I welcome the role that the UK is playing in funding the global relief effort. Will the Minister confirm what more work his Department plans to do to ensure that we can get the aid to where it is needed within Yemen?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. On 3 April, DFID announced an additional £170 million for the new financial year in response to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. We work with all partners to ensure that there is greater access and a greater prospect of resolution of the conflict through the new UN special envoy Martin Griffiths.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I welcome the steps that the Department is taking to secure continued humanitarian access to Yemen, and urge Ministers to do the same in Syria in the light of recent events. Does the Minister foresee humanitarian grounds for military intervention in Yemen, as those were apparently the grounds for action in Syria? In any event, will he confirm—unequivocally and without exception—that none of the 0.7% aid budget, which is for the world’s poorest and most vulnerable, will be used to fund military activities?

Alistair Burt: There is no prospect of United Kingdom military action in Yemen. The humanitarian efforts are going on at the same time as seeking to resolve the complex political difficulties there. I remind the House of the exceptional difficulties of access in the northern areas controlled by the Houthis.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The Minister’s Department assured the public at the start of March, following the Secretary of State’s trip to the region in December, that humanitarian access in Yemen had been restored. However, fuel imports are estimated to be just 30% of what is needed, with food imports at just 9%. Bombing of port areas also continues. Why did the Secretary of State sign a £100 million aid partnership with Saudi Arabia in March, without insisting on full, permanent aid access in Yemen?

Alistair Burt: In March, imports met 61% of monthly food needs and 60% of monthly fuel needs. While we recognise, of course, that the level of access is not as great as we would wish, we are working hard with coalition partners to make sure not only that there is increased access but that the issues concerning the smuggling of weapons into Yemen, which has been a principal cause of the restricted access, are being dealt with as well.

Women and Children’s Education

3. **David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps she is taking to help enable access to education for women and children in developing countries. [904703]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): The UK is a major investor in education generally and in girls’ education specifically. Yesterday, the Prime Minister committed

£212 million through the Girls' Education Challenge to ensure that almost 1 million girls across the Commonwealth, including the most marginalised, can get the quality education they need to fulfil their potential.

David Evennett: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she is doing in this important field. I join her in celebrating the Girls' Education Challenge—the programme supported so strongly by her Department. Will she update the House on the future of this programme going forward?

Harriett Baldwin: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the amazing work of the Girls' Education Challenge, which is the world's largest girls' education programme. Yesterday's announcement of £212 million will support 920,000 girls in Commonwealth countries and give 53,000 highly marginalised adolescent girls in Commonwealth countries the opportunity to have a second chance at learning.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that one thing that inhibits girls' access to education is early motherhood? What steps are the Government taking to ensure excellent family planning and contraceptive services in developing countries?

Harriett Baldwin: We remain strongly committed to our family planning programme, under which we work in a variety of different ways, whether through provision of family planning services directly or advice to girls in schools, to try to ensure that girls are not getting pregnant during their education.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Sadly, parents in developing countries are sometimes persuaded to give up their children to orphanages on the promise of a good education. The charity Home for Good told me this morning that the Australian Parliament is looking at measures to tackle orphanage trafficking as part of its modern slavery legislation. Does DFID have any plans to amend our legislation similarly?

Harriett Baldwin: DFID's policy on orphanages is not to fund those establishments. On my right hon. Friend's point about whether UK legislation, which has led the world in tackling the terrible issue of trafficking, should be amended, we will certainly be discussing that with Home Office colleagues.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that one of the most disruptive things in a family's education is when a member of that family is killed by the greatest epidemic of our times—unnecessary, preventable road deaths, which kill 1.3 million people a year on our planet?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his amazing work as a United Nations envoy on this important issue. It is important not only that children can go to school but that they can get to school safely. That is why DFID funds a range of different programmes to tackle the problem.

UK Aid Match Fund

4. **Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** What estimate she has made of the total contribution of the UK Aid Match fund to projects in developing countries. [904704]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): So far, UK Aid Match has provided more than 100 grants benefiting more than 24 million people in 22 countries.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Secretary of State for that response. Will she outline how UK Aid Match funding is allocated to ensure that projects on the ground are receiving the dividends of the generous spirit of so many in the UK? What is being done to ensure that not a penny goes to militarily active groups in any way, shape or form?

Penny Mordaunt: UK Aid Match is a competitive process. We select the strongest appeals and projects, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that not a penny goes to military groups.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that Aid Match is a vital method for building support for international development among the UK public, as it allows them a genuine say over where and how the aid budget is spent?

Penny Mordaunt: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Some 89% of the public believe that helping developing nations is a good thing to do, and I know that they support the Aid Match programme.

Modern Slavery

5. **Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to tackle modern slavery in developing countries. [904705]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): Tackling modern slavery is a priority for DFID. We are expanding our work in developing countries through £40 million of new programming that will reach at least 500,000 people at risk of slavery. Today, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is announcing £3 million of new funding to tackle child exploitation in the Commonwealth.

Royston Smith: Libya has become a hub for human traffickers who exploit migrants and refugees attempting to make their way to Europe. That has left thousands of women the victims of horrendous abuse. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Libyan Government of National Accord to bring traffickers to justice and to end that abuse?

Alistair Burt: As good fortune would have it, the recess took me to Libya, to Tripoli, where I met the Prime Minister, the Minister for Justice and the Minister for the Interior. We did indeed discuss the difficulties relating to trafficking that my hon. Friend mentions. We are supporting the Libyan Government with capacity building. We are also working on a £75 million programme to try to deter migrants from moving from sub-Saharan Africa where they might be at risk on that route. It remains an important issue for us and the Government of National Accord in Libya.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 requires British companies with a turnover of £36 million to make declarations of actions that they are taking to reduce modern-day slavery, yet by their own admission, the Government neither keep a record of companies that should make a declaration nor monitor those that have done. What action is the Minister taking with his Government colleagues to make sure that British companies are not unwittingly perpetuating modern-day slavery?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We are setting up a new business hub to try to ensure that companies accept their obligations in that regard, and we will be working hard with them to make sure that they do.

Technology: Developing Countries

6. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps she is taking to support the development of technology in developing countries. [904706]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): Our investments in technologies are saving and changing lives all over the world. Half of DFID's £397 million annual research budget is focused on new technologies in developing countries in the health, agriculture, climate, clean energy, water, education and humanitarian response sectors.

Stephen Metcalfe: Over the years, I have been fortunate to see at first hand how some of our aid budget has helped to develop technologies and engineer solutions that have changed people's lives around the world. Can the Minister tell the House, however, whether any of the technologies that have been invented using our aid budget have been of direct benefit to people here in the UK?

Harriett Baldwin: I welcome the interest of the former Chair of the Science and Technology Committee in this important work and commend the Committee to hear from the team involved, because there are a range of different examples. Diseases know no boundaries, and the UK's development of a test for TB is a good example.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Wales and Lesotho share the precious asset of water. Will the Minister support my initiative to bring together Welsh Water—the not-for-profit water company in Wales—and the Government of Lesotho to work on providing technological solutions to the problems that we share?

Harriett Baldwin: That is a wonderful example of the way in which Welsh Water and Lesotho water companies can work together to ensure that everyone has access to clean water.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We are running out of time—in a single sentence, Vicky Ford.

10. [904710] **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Last weekend, the Government announced that they would spend another £25 million on cleaning up plastic from the seas

and on new research into that. Developing countries are responsible for half of the plastic in our seas, but less than 1% of our overseas aid budget goes on helping those countries with waste management. Should we increase that percentage?

Harriett Baldwin: I know that my hon. Friend tried to give up plastic for Lent and saw what a challenge it is, which is why we were so delighted to announce over the weekend further funding for research that will help tackle the prevalence of plastic not only in developing countries but here at home.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In sub-Saharan Africa, one of the most comprehensive issues is the provision of clean water to many hundreds of thousands of people, and many small charities are doing that. Will the Minister work closely with them to ensure the provision of technology to develop that in future?

Harriett Baldwin: In paying tribute to the wonderful work that those small charities do around the world, I draw hon. Members' attention to our small charities challenge fund, which is an open window through which they can bid for additional funding.

Topical Questions

T1. [904716] **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): We were all appalled by the horrific attack in Douma, Syria, on 7 April. All indications are that this was a chemical weapons attack. We have not had to rely on hearsay to conclude that: UK medical and scientific experts have analysed open-source reports, images and video footage and concluded that the victims were exposed to a toxic element. This is corroborated by first-hand accounts from aid workers.

Luke Hall: May I take the opportunity to welcome the Secretary of State's speech last week outlining her vision for the future of international development policy? Will she update the House on the practical steps she is taking to make that vision a reality?

Penny Mordaunt: We need to ensure that UK aid is working doubly hard—better delivering on the global goals but also working in the UK's national interest—and is not just spent well, but could not be spent better. Part of that will be delivered through a new cross-Government ministerial ODA meeting to ensure greater coherence and better spend of UK aid.

T2. [904717] **Richard Burden** (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The Minister of State is one of 57 Members who over the years have visited the village of Khan al-Ahmar and its primary school, which was built with international assistance. Does he know that, one week today, that school could be destroyed as a result of a court hearing to make way for an illegal Israeli settlement expansion? Does he agree that the UK Government should make urgent representations to the Government of Israel that such action would contravene international law?

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): The hon. Gentleman is right—I have indeed visited the school and the village. The UK has made repeated representations on this particular possibility of demolition and I assure him that we will continue to do so as a matter of urgency.

Mr Speaker: I call Richard Graham. Where is the fella? He is not here, but he ought to be. What a shame.

T5. [904720] **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): In the last few weeks, there has sadly been an increase in tension and violence on the Israel-Gaza border. Just last weekend, Israel destroyed a cross-border tunnel that Hamas had built to attack Israeli civilians. I happen to have seen that those tunnels involve a huge amount of construction materials, so what is the Minister doing to ensure that no UK aid is being diverted to fund those terrible tunnels?

Alistair Burt: We are well aware of this threat. We support the materials monitoring unit of the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, which oversees the approval, entry and use of materials for reconstruction. We regularly audit spending to ensure that there is no diversion in the manner that my hon. Friend raised.

T3. [904718] **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): Will the Minister update the House on what progress has been made to rebuild homes, schools and hospitals in Rakhine state after the Burmese Government burned them to the ground?

Penny Mordaunt: Ensuring that we have good access is critical to whatever work we do in Rakhine and our prime concern is to stop any initial violence. Our main effort to help the Rohingya is ensuring that we are as prepared as we can be for the cyclone season that is about to hit Cox's Bazar.

T6. [904721] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement yesterday on malaria that we will remain committed to the fight, and the hosting of today's summit. However, with the United Nations saying that progress on malaria is now at risk, what influence will the Secretary of State use on Commonwealth countries and others to ensure that the fight continues?

Alistair Burt: We are proud to be a global leader in tackling malaria and we have committed £500 million a year until 2021 to that fight. We will work with global partners to spend that effectively. We particularly appreciate the efforts of Bill Gates and the foundation, and we thank him for his kind words this morning about the British Government's contribution to that.

Mr Speaker: I call David Linden. *[Interruption.]*

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: I say to the hon. Gentleman: enjoy it while it lasts, man.

T7. [904722] **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Last year, I visited Tanzania,

where we heard of the desire to get young girls into education. One of the major barriers is period poverty. What are the Government doing to help to solve that issue?

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that important issue. I can assure him that there are some 5,000 schools where the Girls' Education Challenge is supporting many, many girls in their menstrual protection.

T8. [904723] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): The Department for International Development is a founder member of the Robert Carr civil society Networks Fund. The Government have led the way in funding this work, supporting regional and global networks working with groups disproportionately affected by HIV. Currently, the RCNF can only afford to fund 50% of the quality proposals it sees. Will my right hon. Friend commit to continuing to fund the RCNF's vital work? What efforts are the Department making to fund the battle against HIV?

Alistair Burt: We are very proud to be a founding supporter of the Robert Carr civil society Networks Fund. So far, the United Kingdom has committed £9 million to it. We will make our decision on future investments to the fund later this year and I hope to attend the international convention on HIV/AIDS prevention in Amsterdam later this year.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Given the Government's wretched treatment of the Windrush generation and the loss and destruction of paperwork, will the Secretary of State talk to her colleagues about introducing an amnesty?

Penny Mordaunt: That gives me the opportunity to reiterate what I said earlier. The Home Office has now stepped up its efforts to ensure that people are reassured. It has given further reassurances on precisely the point the hon. Gentleman raises. We all have to ensure, as constituency MPs and as members of the Government, that everyone has the information and support they need at this moment.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): DeafKidz International, which is based in my constituency, does great work to protect deaf children around the world. What is DFID doing to redress the imbalance of services available to deaf children?

Penny Mordaunt: I praise the work of DeafKidz International, which has also received UK aid funding. We are doing many things. Through the Girls' Education Challenge, we supported 46,000 girls with disabilities, including deaf girls, to access education.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It has never been more important to make the positive case for overseas aid. However, delivery of the global learning programme in schools ends in July. May we have an assurance that it will be replaced in time for September?

Penny Mordaunt: We are doing a refresh of some of those programmes. Clearly, programmes such as Connecting Classrooms will carry on and we are doing a refresh of the International Citizenship Service. We think these

are important ways in which we can deliver on the global goals and help young people in our country to learn more about the rest of the world.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904724] **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 18 April.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This week, the UK plays host to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. I know the whole House will want to join me in welcoming to London leaders from 52 countries, who collectively represent a third of the world's population. Over the coming days, we will discuss a range of shared priorities, from oceans and cyber-security to continuing to tackle malaria and ensuring all children have access to 12 years of quality education. With 60% of the Commonwealth under the age of 30, the summit will have a particular focus on how we revitalise the organisation to ensure its continuing relevance, especially for young people.

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.

Neil O'Brien: The whole House will be aware of the stories of people who came to this country from the Commonwealth more than 45 years ago—people who are facing the anxiety of being asked for documents they cannot provide to prove their right to reside in the country they call home. Will the Prime Minister update the House on what she and the Government are doing to provide reassurance in these cases?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue, which I know has caused a great deal of concern and anxiety, so I would like to update the House.

People in the Windrush generation who came here from Commonwealth countries have built a life here; they have made a massive contribution to the country. These people are British. They are part of us. I want to be absolutely clear that we have no intention of asking anyone to leave who has the right to remain here. [Interruption.] For those who have mistakenly received letters challenging them, I want to apologise to them. I want to say sorry to anyone who has felt confusion or anxiety as a result of this.

I want to be clear with the House about how this has arisen. Those Commonwealth citizens—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must calm down. The Prime Minister is responding to the question. There will be a very full opportunity for questioning of the Prime Minister on this occasion, as there is on every occasion, but the questions must be heard and the answers must be heard.

The Prime Minister: Thank you. Let me update the House on how this has arisen. Those Commonwealth citizens who arrived before 1973 and were settled here have a right conferred by the Immigration Act 1971 to

live in the UK. They were not required to take any action with the Home Office to document their status. The overwhelming majority already have the immigration documents they need, but there are some who, through no fault of their own, do not, and those are the people we are working hard to help now. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made clear that a new dedicated team is being set up to help these people evidence their right to be here and access services, and it will aim to resolve cases within two weeks, once the evidence has been put together.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Last month, I raised the case of Albert Thompson, a man who has lived and worked here for decades, paid his taxes, and yet been denied national health service treatment. The Prime Minister brushed it off. Will she say what she will now do to ensure that Mr Thompson gets the cancer treatment he urgently needs and is entitled to?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman did indeed raise the case of Albert Thompson. It was not brushed off—[HON. MEMBERS: "It was!"] No, the Home Office has been in contact with Mr Thompson's representatives. First of all, I want to make one point very clear: no urgent treatment should be withheld by the NHS, regardless of ability or willingness to pay—[HON. MEMBERS: "It was!"] No, I also want to make clear that as it happens, Mr Thompson is not part of the Windrush generation that I have just spoken about in answer to the first question. And finally, clinicians have been looking at Mr Thompson's case and he will be receiving the treatment he needs.

Jeremy Corbyn: On 20 March, the Prime Minister wrote to me stating,

"while I sympathise with Mr Thompson...we encourage him to make the appropriate application"

and provide evidence of "his settled status here." Yesterday, we learnt that in 2010, the Home Office destroyed landing cards for a generation of Commonwealth citizens and so have told people, "We can't find you in our system." Did the Prime Minister, the then Home Secretary, sign off that decision?

The Prime Minister: No, the decision to destroy the landing cards was taken in 2009 under a Labour Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: All the evidence—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I said the Prime Minister must be heard. The Leader of the Opposition must be heard, and he will be.

Jeremy Corbyn: All the evidence suggests—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There was a lot of this yesterday—very noisy and extremely stupid barracking. It must stop now. That is the end of the matter. The public absolutely despise that type of behaviour, from wherever in the House it takes place. Cut it out and grow up!

Jeremy Corbyn: I remind the Prime Minister that it was her Government who created "a really hostile environment" for immigrants and her Government who introduced the Immigration Act 2014.

We need absolute clarity on the question of the destruction of the landing cards. If she is trying to blame officials, I remind her that in 2004 she said she was “sick and tired of Government Ministers...who simply blame other people when things go wrong.”

Does she stand by that advice?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman asked me if the decision to destroy the landing cards—the decision—had been taken in my time as Home Secretary. The decision to destroy the landing cards was taken in 2009 when, as I seem to recall, a Labour Home Secretary was in position.

Jeremy Corbyn: It was under a Tory Government, and she was Home Secretary at that time, and that is what is causing such pain and such stress to a whole generation. On Monday, the Home Secretary told the House:

“I am concerned that the Home Office has become too concerned with policy and strategy and sometimes loses sight of the individual.”—[*Official Report*, 16 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 28.]

Who does the Prime Minister think is to blame for that—the current Home Secretary or her predecessor?

The Prime Minister: The Home Office is a great Department of State that touches people’s lives every day in a whole variety of ways. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has been swift in responding to the unfortunate confusion and anxiety, for which we have apologised, that has arisen from the Windrush generation. The right hon. Gentleman referred earlier to action that we had taken as a Conservative Government to deal with illegal immigration. It is absolutely right that we ensure that people who access services that are paid for by taxpayers and relied on by people living in this country have the right to do so and that we take action against people here illegally. The Windrush generation are here legally—they have a right to be here; they are British. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to question the idea of taking action against illegal immigration, I suggest he has a conversation with the former shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who in 2013 said:

“we need much stronger action from Government to bring illegal immigration down”.

Jeremy Corbyn: This is not about illegal immigration; this is about Commonwealth citizens who had every right to be here. Cases such as Mr Thompson’s have occurred because it was Home Office policy in 2012 to create “a really hostile environment” for migrants, and the right hon. Lady was the Home Secretary who sent Home Office vans around Brent telling migrants to go home. On Monday, the Immigration Minister said that some British citizens had been “deported in error”. The Home Secretary did not know, and then asked Commonwealth high commissioners if they knew of any cases. Does the Prime Minister know how many British citizens have been wrongly deported and where to, and what provision has she made to bring them back home to Britain?

The Prime Minister: As the Immigration Minister has made clear, we apologise unreservedly for the distress caused to anyone who has been told incorrectly that they do not have the right to be in the UK. We are not

aware of any specific cases of a person being removed from the UK in these circumstances and we have absolutely no intention of asking anyone to leave who has the right to remain here, but the Home Office will work to reach out to those from the Windrush generation who do not have the necessary documentation to ensure that that is provided. There will be no cost to them; nobody will be out of pocket as a result. There is a difference between the Windrush generation, who are British, are part of us and have a right to here—we want to give them the reassurance of that right—and those other people who are here illegally. It is absolutely right that the Government make every effort to ensure that people who access our services have a right to do so and that we take action against people who are here illegally.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am informed that Mr Albert Thompson has still not been informed when he will be getting the treatment he obviously needs as a matter of urgency. Does the Home Office not keep records? It has been months since these occasions were first brought to the Government’s attention. We know of at least two British citizens languishing in detention centres in error, and this morning the Jamaican Prime Minister has said that he knows of people who are unable to return to Britain.

This is a shameful episode, and the responsibility for it lies firmly at the Prime Minister’s door. Her pandering to bogus immigration targets led to a hostile environment for people contributing to our country, and it led to British citizens being denied NHS treatment, losing their jobs, homes and pensions, and being thrown into detention centres like criminals and even deported, with vital historical records shredded and Ministers blaming officials. The Windrush generation came to our country after the war to rebuild our nation, which had been so devastated by war. Is not the truth that, under her, the Home Office became heartless and hopeless, and does not she now run a Government who are both callous and incompetent?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, the Windrush generation did come here after the war, they did help to build this country, many of them worked in our public services and they contributed. They have a right to be here: they are British. That is why we are working with those who have no documentation to ensure that they have that provided for them. The decision was taken in 1971 not to require them to have documentation. That is what has led to the problem that we now see in relation to the anxiety of these people.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about being callous and having a disregard for people. I have to say to him that I am the Prime Minister who initiated the race disparity audit, which said: what are we doing in this country to ensure that people have equal opportunities in this country? The right hon. Gentleman talks about being callous. I say to him that I will not take that, following a debate last night where powerful contributions were made, particularly by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). I will not take an accusation of being callous from a man who allows anti-Semitism to run rife in his party.

Q6. [904729] John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): A few weeks ago, a gentleman from Islington called Jeremy visited my constituency of Carlisle and brought with him a

vision of 1970s Britain. When Theresa from Maidenhead next comes to Carlisle, will she reassure the people of Carlisle that she brings a vision of 21st-century Britain, which includes the ideals of freedom, opportunity, choice, personal responsibility and, most importantly of all, national security?

The Prime Minister: May I assure my hon. Friend that Theresa from Maidenhead would bring exactly that? I am very pleased that, in yesterday's unemployment figures, we see employment in this country at a record high. Any visit to Carlisle will be about jobs, it will be about the future and it will be about national security—our commitment to spend 2% of our GDP on our defence, our commitment to ensure that we have the powers for our intelligence services and law enforcement agencies that they need to keep us safe—and I look forward to my visit to Carlisle.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister agree with her Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who is sitting just along from her, that the rape clause provides victims with “double support”?

The Prime Minister: I know this is an issue that has been raised a number of times in this House. It is an incredibly sensitive issue, and of course I fully recognise the sensitivities that are involved for the mothers involved. We have taken great care—considerable time and care—to set up procedures, following extensive consultations, that mean that no Government staff will question these mothers about what they have experienced. The point my right hon. Friend was making was that a mother will be granted the exemption through engaging with specialist professionals, such as health and social workers, who may be able to provide them with support in those circumstances over and beyond the issue of their entitlement.

Ian Blackford: That is not quite the point that the Secretary of State made when she seemed to offend all who were at the meeting of the Parliament in Edinburgh.

Rape Crisis Scotland has clearly stated:

“Hinging benefits on proving trauma isn't a choice, it's a disgrace and one which may well re-traumatise women.”

The chair of the British Medical Association in Scotland has said that the rape clause

“is fundamentally damaging for women—forcing them to disclose rape and abuse at a time and in a manner not of their choosing, at pain of financial penalty.”

This is the form, Mr Speaker, with a box for the child's name. What kind of society do we live in?

The Prime Minister: We live in a society in which we have taken every care to ensure that this is dealt with in as sensitive a manner as possible. That is why the Government took considerable time and engaged in extensive consultations when putting the arrangements in place. As I have said, no mother in these circumstances will be granted the exemption by dealing with jobcentre staff; mothers will be granted the exemption by dealing with specialist professionals.

Q7. [904730] **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): May I add my support to the Prime Minister for the action that she took at the weekend regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria?

In Cornwall there is huge disparity between average house prices and average wages. Many working families earning between £15,000 and £20,000 a year would need to earn 10 times their income to buy an open-market house, and the average salary in Cornwall is about £18,000 a year. The challenges of housing delivery in urban areas are fundamentally different from those in rural and coastal areas. I know that my right hon. Friend cares deeply about getting people on to the housing ladder. Will she therefore meet me, and a group of rural and coastal MPs, to discuss how we can tackle this vital issue?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important point, and he is absolutely right to do so. Home ownership is a dream, and, sadly, too many young people today feel that they will not be able to achieve that dream. We have been having success—last year more homes were built than in any but one of the last 30 years—but we need to ensure that we are helping people into home ownership and seeing more homes being built. I should be happy to meet my hon. Friend and others to discuss this matter.

Q2. [904725] **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I welcome the Prime Minister's consultation on domestic abuse and, in particular, the recognition of financial abuse. However, the Government insist on paying universal credit into just one household account, which makes women more financially vulnerable. Eighty-five per cent. of abuse survivors say that they would not have dared to request split payments as a special measure, because it would have worsened abuse. Will the Prime Minister listen to the calls from women's charities and make split payments of universal credit the norm?

The Prime Minister: I understand that it is, in fact, possible for special arrangements to be made for split payments. Domestic abuse—domestic violence—is a terrible abuse, a terrible crime that we must deal with, but I understand that it is possible for those arrangements to be made.

Q8. [904731] **David Tredinnick** (Bosworth) (Con): Is the Prime Minister aware of the proposal to build upwards of 50,000 houses and develop 2,000 acres for new businesses along the length of the A5 from the M1 junction to Staffordshire over the next 12 years? Is she further aware that parts of the road are still single carriageway, and will she discuss with the Secretary of State for Transport the possibility of releasing £10 million to get the next stage of the expressway project going?

The Prime Minister: I am very much aware of the key role that is played by the A5 in the midlands and of the plans for growth—the plans for new housing to which my hon. Friend has referred—along a route that is so important to him and his constituents. As he will know, we are already making investments in the A5. However, I have also heard his case promoted by Midlands Connect, as has my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary, and it will be considered very carefully as we make decisions on further road investment.

Q3. [904726] **Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): A National Audit Office report today says that our armed forces are 8,200 people below the current requirement, the numbers leaving the armed forces have increased and

there are significant “shortfalls in critical skills”. In their 2017 manifesto, the Tory party and Prime Minister said:

“We will attract and retain the best men and women for our armed forces”.

Is this not just another broken promise? What has gone wrong?

The Prime Minister: We do of course particularly want to ensure that we are recruiting people with the skills our armed forces need. In the modernising defence programme, we are looking at the capabilities we require to defend this country against the threats we face, and that will also involve looking at the particular skills that are necessary.

Q9. [904732] **Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): In the autumn Budget the Chancellor announced plans for a mid-Wales growth deal. In an area that has received historically low levels of investment, this vital initiative has been welcomed by everyone, especially by 90% of the small and medium-sized enterprises that are located in that region. Therefore, can my right hon. Friend tell the House what progress is being made and confirm that this welcome growth deal will not only enhance links between north and south Wales, but connect Wales to the midlands engine?

The Prime Minister: We are actively considering the proposals for the mid-Wales growth deal. I know that my hon. Friend has put a lot of effort into this, particularly into bringing local partners together, including by making important cross-border links for this area. We believe that the best decisions and proposals for what will work for mid-Wales will come from people who live, work and do business there. We will be offering help and support, and UK Government Ministers in Wales have already met a variety of local partners to start this process off. We are ambitious for Wales and I am keen to see every part of Wales having a city or growth deal.

Q4. [904727] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Last month, the Prime Minister met six-year-old Alfie Dingley and his family at Downing Street, so I think she understands how vital it is that he gets access to the cannabis-based medicine that treats his very rare and severe form of epilepsy. On Monday, the Home Office received an application for a licence from Alfie’s GP and a leading neurologist so that he can access the medicine. Can the Prime Minister assure his family that she will do what she can to ensure that the application is granted by the Home Office as quickly as possible so that Alfie can get the help he desperately needs?

The Prime Minister: I was very pleased to be able to meet Alfie and his family, and I know the sympathies of Members across the House are with them as he undergoes treatment. I have written to the family to reiterate our commitment to explore a range of options for finding a solution for Alfie. Of course we want to ensure that people get the treatment they need. It is also important that medicines are properly and thoroughly tested, but I will certainly ensure that the Home Office looks at this application speedily.

Q11. [904734] **Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): As the second largest donor to the global effort against malaria, the UK has, since 2000, helped cut malaria deaths by 60%,

saving nearly 7 million lives, but much more needs to be done. Will the Prime Minister give her personal commitment to maintaining the UK’s global leadership in the fight against this deadly yet preventable condition?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this very important issue. It is one of the issues we will be focusing on in this Commonwealth Heads of Government week, and yesterday I called on my fellow Commonwealth leaders to join the UK in committing to halving the number of malaria cases by 2023. We are the second largest donor to the fight against malaria and, as the Minister for the Middle East, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) said in International Development questions, we remain committed to our five-year pledge to spend £500 million tackling it. Yesterday I announced that the UK will commit a further £100 million to the global fund, which has the aim of unlocking a further £100 million of investment from the private sector.

Q5. [904728] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): Three months ago, following the Carillion collapse, building works stopped on the two-thirds finished Midland Metropolitan Hospital in Smethwick. On 28 February, I raised this with the Prime Minister, and she assured me that:

“The Department of Health and Social Care and NHS Improvement are working with the trust and the private finance initiative company so that work can recommence as soon as possible.”—[*Official Report*, 28 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 828.]

Six weeks later, after endless dithering by those bodies, I have to ask the Prime Minister to get a grip on her Ministers and officials and get a decision, get a deal and get this hospital built. Will she do that?

The Prime Minister: I am aware that the right hon. Gentleman has raised this issue with me before. The contract between the trust and the private finance initiative company is still in place, so the PFI company is contractually obliged to manage the project and find another subcontractor who can continue to deliver the building work and the services. As the right hon. Gentleman may know, even before the issue arose with Carillion there were some delays to this project. The Department of Health and Social Care is working actively on it, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is doing so as well and he has also been in discussions with the Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, who has also been in discussions with the trust. We recognise the level of concern being raised on this issue and we are working to resolve it.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Team England on winning the second largest tally of gold medals at an overseas Commonwealth games, as they return on Saturday to Birmingham, which will be the next host of the games?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to congratulate Team England on coming second in the medals table—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): And Wales!

The Prime Minister: Wait for it. I am also happy to congratulate Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, all of whom had a very good Commonwealth games. It was

an excellent Commonwealth games; Australia put on a very good show. I was pleased to see that one of the last results was in the women's netball, in which we beat Australia.

Q10. [904733] **Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): This has been an unprecedented year for violent crime in London. Less than four months into 2018, we have already seen almost 60 murders. The Metropolitan police do a fantastic job, but Home Office documents show that there is a correlation between the reduction in police resources and the rise in violent crime. Even after the precept increase, the Met will still need to make savings of £325 million by 2021. Will the Prime Minister acknowledge that these chronic cuts are unsustainable and commit to reversing this harmful underfunding?

The Prime Minister: More money is being made available to police forces in the 2018-19 year, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has taken action in relation to the serious violent strategy that she has published. Also, I have to say this to the hon. Lady:

"We do not say that there is a direct causal factor between the number of officers on the ground and the number of crimes."

She may wave her hand at that, but those are not my words but those of the shadow Policing Minister.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My right hon. Friend has rightly made reference to yesterday's debate on anti-Semitism. I sat in the Chamber and listened to that debate, including the two appalling testimonies from the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and particularly from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), which were deeply moving. They were horrifying in the sense of the abuse that those hon. Members have faced, but also uplifting in the sense of the bravery that they have shown in tackling their abusers. Does my right hon. Friend agree that what came out of yesterday's debate was that there should be absolutely no place in any political party for anyone who is an anti-Semite and that, just as importantly, any apologists for anti-Semites should be kicked out of their party as well?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. It is incredibly important for us and for the political parties in this country to show a clear signal that we will not accept or tolerate anti-Semitism in any form. I have made reference to a number of the speeches that were made yesterday, and I also join my right hon. Friend in commending those Members, particularly the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent North and for Liverpool, Wavertree, who have suffered incredible abuse as a result of this anti-Semitism but who have also shown incredible bravery in being willing to stand up and set that out to the House. Theirs was a fine example of the best of this House of Commons and the best of Members of Parliament.

Q12. [904735] **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): This week, the UK becomes the chair of the Commonwealth. Many of us will have walked past demonstrations outside Parliament on the issue of Kashmir, and I understand that the Prime Minister will be presented with a petition this afternoon. The stalemate in the bilateral talks between India and Pakistan has failed to deliver any solution to this major nuclear flashpoint.

How will she use the UK's new position to boldly pursue peace and human rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises a question that I know has been raised in the House before. I am sure that it is a matter of concern not only to him but to a number of his constituents. We continue to take the view that the best resolution of this issue is for India and Pakistan themselves to come together and resolve the matter. That will be the way to resolve it that will actually ensure the sustainability of a resolution.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): RBS recently announced plans to reduce the number of mobile banking visits to Dufftown in Moray. Following strong representations from myself, Dufftown and District Community Council, and Speyside Community Council, the bank confirmed yesterday that it would not go ahead with its plans. Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming that? However, does she agree that RBS needs to engage more with local communities, because had it done so, it would have realised how unacceptable its proposals were?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in welcoming RBS's decision, but I commend him for his efforts on behalf of his constituents in Dufftown. Such things are commercial issues for the banks, but we have been clear that banks need to consider carefully the impact on people and their access to services when making such decisions.

Q13. [904736] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Following the commitment by Prime Minister Modi and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley to end tuberculosis in India by 2025, will the Prime Minister commit to encouraging other Commonwealth leaders at this week's Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting to make similar commitments in advance of the UN high-level meeting on TB? Will she also attempt to show Britain's continued support for the fight against TB?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue, and we are happy to ensure through various channels that we encourage others to follow the example that India has shown in relation to TB. At one stage, it was eradicated here in the UK, but we need to ensure that action is taken in other countries around the world.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): As the Prime Minister said, unemployment is at a 43-year low, and investment in UK industries, including the tech industry, is at a high. When she is on her way to Carlisle, will she come and visit Imagination Technologies? It has received an £8 billion investment, which shows the confidence that overseas technology investors have in our tech industry.

The Prime Minister: I think that that might be a bit of a detour on my way to Carlisle, but I certainly support what my hon. Friend says about the importance of high-tech business and of the work that companies such as Imagination Technologies are doing.

Q14. [904737] **Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): The Ceredigion coastline is among the most stunning in the British Isles, and Cardigan bay has sustained communities on the value of its beauty and bounty. For 150 years, the

lifeboat station at New Quay has valiantly safeguarded those who venture out into the bay, but it is possible that Ceredigion will no longer have an all-weather lifeboat from 2020. Does the Prime Minister agree that the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, which does invaluable work, serves as a fourth emergency service and that, as such, it is essential that the coastline of Ceredigion, like every other populated coastline, has access to that service whatever the weather?

The Prime Minister: Search and rescue at sea is provided by several organisations, including the coastguard and the RNLI. The RNLI has a proud tradition, and we should be grateful for its record on search and rescue at sea. It is obviously independent and decides where best to put its resources, but we are supporting the work of independent lifeboat charities through our rescue boat grant fund, which has allocated more than £3.5 million since 2014 to increase capacity and resilience by providing new boats and equipment.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribbles Valley) (Con): The Commonwealth is a wonderful organisation, but too many Commonwealth countries have anti-gay legislation on their statute book. Of course, a lot of that is a legacy of the colonial days, when Britain was a very different country. What message about gay rights does the Prime Minister have for Commonwealth leaders this week? More importantly, that message should go out to gay people in those countries who are suffering because of such legislation.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We have a special responsibility to help to change hearts and minds on such issues within the Commonwealth. When I addressed the Commonwealth forum yesterday, I said that across the Commonwealth

“discriminatory laws made many years ago continue to affect the lives of many people, criminalising same-sex relations and failing to protect women and girls.”

Many such laws were put in place by this country, and I deeply regret the legacy of discrimination, violence and even death that persists today. As a family of Commonwealth nations, we must respect one another's customs and traditions, but we must do so in a matter that is consistent with our common value of equality. The message that I sent yesterday is that we stand ready to support any Commonwealth member that wants to reform outdated legislation that makes such discrimination possible.

Q15. [904738] **Frank Field** (Birkenhead) (Lab): When the Prime Minister meets Mr Modi as part of the Commonwealth gathering, might she seek to understand why India is, relatively speaking, so successful in countering child trafficking and draw lessons for this country?

The Prime Minister: I have already met Prime Minister Modi—I did so this morning—and I raised the issue of human trafficking and the work being done in India. We will be setting up discussions between our officials.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): London welcomes our good friend Prime Minister Modi today. Will my right hon. Friend take the opportunity to condemn absolutely the mobile billboards that are going around London attacking our good friend Prime Minister Modi,

and will she congratulate and thank the 1.7 million members of the Indian diaspora on their contribution to the work of this country?

The Prime Minister: India is indeed a good friend of the United Kingdom, and the Indian diaspora here in the UK plays an enormous role and makes an enormous contribution to our society and our economy. I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating and thanking them, and indeed in encouraging the continuation of that contribution. When I spoke to Prime Minister Modi, we discussed how we can encourage and increase the links and development between our two countries.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The vile online and social media abuse suffered in particular by female politicians, which was movingly highlighted in yesterday's debate and also by events at the weekend back home in Northern Ireland, is testimony to how this must be tackled head-on. Can the Prime Minister assure us that steps will be taken to bring social media companies and platforms to account, so that the wild west culture of “anything goes” is brought to an end as quickly as possible?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises a very important point about how these platforms can be used for the sort of abuse that we heard about in the Chamber last night and that, as he says, has also been raised in Northern Ireland in the past few days. We are working with the social media companies. Good work has been done with them on a number of aspects, such as child abuse on those platforms, and we continue to work with them on the wider issues. We are also looking at the issue of the liability of social media companies. They are not publishers, but on the other hand, they are not just platforms. We are looking at that issue urgently.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Free and fair elections are the foundation of our democracy. I am sure that the Prime Minister will be aware of the events that happened in the Gower constituency during last year's election, where the Labour activist Dan Evans has admitted spreading lies and libellous accusations against our former colleague Byron Davies, to influence the outcome of the election. It appears that his efforts worked. Does the Prime Minister believe that the leadership of the Labour party needs to make it very clear that our democracy has no place for this sort of behaviour? Does she believe that the honourable thing would be for the new incumbent of that seat to resign and fight a free and honest by-election?

The Prime Minister: Of course, our former colleague Byron Davies has received an apology, and I understand that a donation has been made to charity. Of course, our former colleague lost his job as a result of the action that was taken. People across the House talk of free and fair elections—that is what we believe in as a democracy—but political parties need not just to talk about free and fair elections; they need to ensure they put it into practice.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Last week, Shop Direct announced that it is closing all its Greater Manchester sites, with the loss of 2,000 jobs, including nearly 1,400 in my constituency at Shaw. That was without prior warning or discussion

with staff, the unions, Oldham Council or even myself. Given that this is about the ascendance of automation, what specific measures is the Prime Minister taking to support my constituents? Will she meet me and my colleagues to discuss this and the longer-term, more general impact of automation on the labour market?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, this is a time of great concern for the Shop Direct workers and their families in Greater Manchester. The Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus are working with the company to understand the level of support that is required for employees, and the DWP stands ready to put in place its rapid response service to support any workers who are made redundant and to help them back into employment as quickly as possible. There are a number of ways in which Jobcentre Plus can support workers, and it will ensure that it does that in this instance.

The hon. Lady raises a wider issue about the impact of automation on jobs. We are looking at the question as part of our industrial strategy, and I will ask the Business Secretary to meet her to discuss it.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Malaria has been mentioned by several Members in the Chamber today. In her conversations with the Prime Minister of Canada this week, will the Prime Minister be discussing how the G7 can help to drive progress towards a malaria-free world?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. I have not yet met Prime Minister Trudeau this week, but this is certainly an issue that we have

made sure is being spoken about here at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, and we will raise it within the G7 context.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In 2009, Michelle Samaraweera was raped and murdered. Since 2012, Aman Vyas has been avoiding extradition for this and eight other charges of sexual violence against women in Walthamstow. There have been 47 hearings to date, with the judge not showing up for seven of them, and seven different judges have been appointed. When the Prime Minister talks to her good friend Prime Minister Modi while he is here in London, will she commit to raising this case with him and asking India to take it seriously, so that we can finally get justice for Michelle?

The Prime Minister: I have already met Prime Minister Modi for our bilateral discussions. There are a number of issues of extradition between the two countries—the UK and India. We raise a number of cases with the Indian Government, as I did this morning. It is important that we recognise the independence of the judiciary in both countries.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. Points of order tend to come after urgent questions, so we will look forward with eager anticipation and a sense of excitement to the contribution of the hon. Gentleman at that point.

Gender Pay Gap

12.48 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for Women if she will make a statement about Government action to close the gender pay gap.

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): May I say that it is a pleasure to answer this urgent question from the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman)? It is unacceptable that in 2018 there are still differences in how men and women are paid in business and in industries. That is why this Government introduced new regulations, which came into force in 2017, requiring all employers with 250 or more employees to report their gender pay gap. I am delighted that as of yesterday 10,055 employers, covering all sectors of the economy, have reported their gender pay gap. These new regulations have shone a light on the injustice that has existed for too long and created a new conversation on the need for a step change in gender equality. We are now working with employers to support them to take action to close the gender pay gap; we are building our research base on what works, to drive real change; and we will be supporting employers to understand what has caused their own gender pay gap and what they can do to make a real difference.

We want employers and employees to succeed in driving real change. The Government have launched a range of initiatives that will help. We introduced shared parental leave to enable working parents to share childcare in the first year of their child's life, and we have extended the right to request flexible working. We have introduced a new £500 million fund to support women and men who have been out of the labour market for a long period to return to work, and we have doubled the early education provision, so that all three and four-year-olds from working households in England can access 30 hours' childcare a week.

I am pleased that the majority of employers have published action plans, alongside their reporting, to set out what they will do to tackle the gender pay gap in their business or sector. I look forward to hearing more about the ongoing work in this area and the work done to address this great inequality, but there is more to this issue than just the regulations. It is about driving cultural change. From the subjects that girls choose to study at school and university to the expectations of women who are climbing their own career ladder, we want the message to women and girls to be, "We will support and encourage you to achieve your full potential."

Ms Harman: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I thank the Minister for her obvious commitment to this issue. It was Labour legislation that enacted gender pay transparency, but it was her Government who implemented it. It is important that they did that, because it has laid bare what women have always known but previously did not have proof of, which is that there is systematic pay discrimination. It is now clear: eight out of 10 employers pay men more than they pay women—and that is across every sector, including the retail sector, which would not exist without women's work. Why on earth should women in Tesco put up with £8 an hour on the checkout when men in the stores get up to £11.50 an hour?

Although it pains me to say this, the trade unions that need to be part of the negotiations to narrow the pay gap need to get their house in order. How can women members of Unite believe that that union will champion their rights to equal pay if there is a 30% pay gap in the union itself? The NASUWT, a teachers union, pays its male staff 40% more than it pays women, so it too has to take action. As for the public sector, let us look at the University of Liverpool. Its public policy is to narrow the pay gap, but the University of Liverpool pays men 90% more in bonuses than it pays women. That has to stop.

Does the Minister agree that we are no longer interested in rationalisations, explanations or justifications? The time for excuses has passed. We want stretching targets year on year to narrow the gap. Will she join me in congratulating the women in the House who have spoken up on this issue, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), among many others, including the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and Labour's Front-Bench team, who have been pushing on this issue? Will she congratulate all the women outside the House who have been pushing on this, not least women in trade unions and the BBC women?

May I give the Minister some sisterly advice on what she should do to really focus on this issue? First, she should stay on the back of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and make sure that it uses all its powers and has the resources to take action. Secondly, she should suggest to the Prime Minister that she has a Cabinet session on the gender pay gap, with all Secretaries of State required to come to Cabinet and say what stretching targets they are going to impose in their Departments and the sectors for which they are responsible. Thirdly, she should commandeer Downing Street for a summit at which business and trade unions can tell her what they are going to do to narrow the pay gap. If she does all that, she will have a great opportunity and a great responsibility, because if she drives forward on narrowing the pay gap, that is not only fair and just but the most important thing to help low-income families and tackle child poverty.

Victoria Atkins: I said at the beginning of my statement that I was extremely grateful to the right hon. and learned Lady for raising this issue in an urgent question, and I meant it. I fully recognise and thank her for the work that she did in government to introduce legislation on the gender pay gap. Like her, I thank other female Members, including the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who, along with her colleagues on the Committee, does so much to drive through change. I thank female Members from all parties. There is a real sense of urgency and impatience about this issue. For what it is worth, my right hon. Friends the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister share our impatience—I hope I do not regret that word—to have this matter sorted.

I must of course pay tribute to the right hon. and learned Lady for all the work she does to try to ensure that this place is a little more understanding and accommodating of a diversity of backgrounds, for Members and our staff. I very much take on her advice, although I

[*Victoria Atkins*]

worry that I might be stepping a bit above my station if I commandeered Downing Street for the summit she suggested—

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): We will back you up!

Victoria Atkins: I assure the right hon. and learned Lady that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is taking a very keen interest in this urgent question and the issue. I welcome her ingenuity of thought. Watch this space.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The Government's action means that large companies cannot hide their gender pay gap any more. We should commend the Government on that. That action means that we have transparency of information, and I believe that that transparency will create a momentum for change. If we are to make that momentum as fast as it can be, will my hon. Friend the Minister outline for the House the work that the Government will do to review some of the causes of the gender pay gap, particularly the discrimination that pregnant women still endure in the workplace? What work will the Government do to make sure that pregnancy discrimination is outlawed in this country in the same way that the Minister is trying to outlaw the gender pay gap?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for that question; I am always grateful for her thoughts and suggestions on this issue and the other subjects that her Select Committee examines. I completely endorse what she said about pregnancy discrimination: discrimination on the grounds of pregnancy is unlawful and wrong. Anyone who suffers from that form of discrimination has the support of the law. My right hon. Friend and other colleagues have raised the issue of the three-month time limit. Tribunals have the power to extend that time limit if they feel it is just and equitable to do so, but I am very conscious of the issues that colleagues have raised in relation to the time limit and am looking into it.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for tabling the urgent question and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting it. I also thank my right hon. and learned Friend for her work on section 78 of the Equality Act 2010.

We need actions, not audits. More than 10,000 companies have reported their gender pay gap, which shows that the Government underestimated the number of organisations that should report. The Government might therefore like to review the figure. It is great that more than 10,000 organisations have reported. Labour's Equality Act—the legislation—was just step 1 of a five-step programme to narrow and close the gender pay gap. In the sisterly way in which these exchanges are being conducted, I wish to tell the Minister the other four steps. She is very welcome to steal them.

Step 1 is the focus on mandatory auditing. Step 2 is companies' and organisations' action plans to close the pay gap. Step 3 is Government certification for fair equality practices, which would ensure that those organisations that are doing well are given certification

to show their progress. Step 4 is to follow in the footsteps of Iceland with further auditing and fines for those organisations that fail to get certification of their equality practices, taking into consideration their action plans and reporting. Step 5, which is extremely important, is to shift the responsibility to unequal pay from the employee to the employer, so that instead of the employee having to go through court cases to prove unequal pay, it would be the employer's responsibility.

In addition, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which I am sure has been mentioned a number of times today, needs more resources. Seventy per cent. cuts to its resources will jeopardise its ability to enforce sanctions, so the Government will need to review the cuts that they have levied on the organisation. Labour wants to follow in the footsteps of Iceland, which consistently ranks as the No. 1 country for gender equality. I hope that the Government will see Labour's five-step plan as a way to accomplish that. The deep-rooted social and economic inequality facing women runs deeper than the pay gap. Women have borne the brunt of 86% of Conservative cuts. More than 60% of those currently earning less than the living wage are women. We need to tackle all the issues.

Victoria Atkins: I am actually more ambitious than the hon. Lady. I do not just want to impose regulations on business; I want a change in the culture of business, a change in the culture of the public sector where we know there are gender pay gaps and a change in the culture of schools and universities. This cannot be imposed from the top down; it must be driven with enthusiasm by the organisations themselves. I hope that this will empower women to begin asking very difficult questions of their employers. I would like women to begin thinking about this when they apply for jobs. They should look at the gender pay gap and make decisions about how that shows how that employer treats their female workforce.

The hon. Lady mentioned the number of companies in the Government's first estimate. This is just the first year. This was always going to be a bit of a learning exercise not just for the Government, but for businesses and the way they manage the system. We are delighted that there are more companies than we initially estimated that meet the criteria. As she knows, the criteria cover businesses that employ 250 or more people, which means big, successful businesses. We are delighted that there are more of those than our initial estimates suggested.

I am very pleased that we have the support of the shadow Front-Bench team in our common ambition to help women in the workplace to get a fairer deal. Of course we must always seek to do better—and we must use the data to improve the way in which women are treated—but I am pleased to note that we have more women in employment than ever before and, what is more, the full-time gender pay gap is at a record low of 9.1%—that is 9.1% too high, but it is at a record low, and it is on a downward trajectory. I am sure that we all support that in this House.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on achieving something that people on both sides of this House have been working towards, which is an audit that gives us an exact understanding of the data. I speak with experience as I

looked at the gender pay gap back in the '90s as an education and employment Minister. The truly shocking figure for me was not just the eight in 10, but the 8% of organisations that have no gender pay gap between men and women. It is most important that we learn from those organisations. May I just say that the law at the moment applies to those with more than 250 employees? When will the Minister look at lowering that limit, because many women who receive unequal pay are in those smaller organisations?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend. Those of us who have been in the House for only a couple of years are very much standing on the shoulders of giants and she, like the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), are among those giants. I am delighted that she has raised the issue of companies or employers that employ fewer than 250 people. I am very much looking at that matter. We must understand that this is world-leading regulation. This is the first time ever that any country has done this on such a scale. By definition, the first year will be a learning process both for the Government and for businesses, but I am very happy to commit to looking at lowering the requirement if the research and data show that that is appropriate.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The gender pay-gap figures show how far we have still to go on this issue. It is very concerning that there are still some 1,500 companies that have failed to report. Perhaps the Minister could tell us a little more about what she intends to do to ensure that they report those figures, because there could be a lot more hiding within them if they have not reported them in time. Will she give more resources to the EHRC to ensure that it can do its enforcement work and follow up on all these cases so that none of that is missed? It occurs to me as well that the reporting is very much the start of the process. It tells us where women are now within the workforce. What more is she doing to look at the pipeline to ensure that women are coming through, because it will take more than just equalising the pay to make that happen? We have to be there right at the start.

I was very glad to hear the Minister's comments on pregnancy discrimination, which is utterly unacceptable in this day and age. Will she expand on the issues around the time limit, because three months is really not long enough for women to put in a claim; six months would be far, far better. It would be good to hear some progress on that.

For the limited powers that we have in Scotland on this issue, the Scottish Government have introduced stronger reporting requirements for public bodies, asking them to publish their pay gap every two years, and also to bring down the threshold from 250 to 20 employees in the public sector. Will the Government take that on, because it is something that they can do right now? I was glad to hear that the Minister is at least considering reducing the threshold to 150 for all companies, because at the moment many companies that employ women are hiding. They will not be able to demonstrate the gap, and women will continue to lose out in those companies, which, I would argue, provide the majority of the workforce in the UK. They, too, need to be held to account.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is an extremely important matter, which I judged rightly, I think, warranted the urgent attention of the House. However, progress has been disappointingly slow. As we have another urgent question and then substantial business thereafter, it would be greatly to our advantage if questions and answers could be a tad pithier.

Victoria Atkins: I apologise, Mr Speaker, but I am just so full of enthusiasm for this subject.

Let me answer the hon. Lady's questions. On the issue of the private sector employers who have yet to report, it has been the responsibility of the EHRC to tackle them since the deadline. It has a programme of action. It wrote to every single employer who did not report on Monday 9 April, and it is considering each and every company that falls within the boundaries that has not yet reported. I should say that 100% of public sector organisations have reported, so they are to be commended for that.

Let me turn now to the issue of the EHRC—I apologise because someone mentioned this earlier. The EHRC will receive £17.4 million in the next financial year. I have spoken to the chief executive and I am not aware that resources are an issue, but of course I will listen to her if she says otherwise. On the very important point about the pipeline, I have to say that that is why the Hampton-Alexander review is so important. At the moment, 27.7% of FTSE 100 companies have women in senior executive positions. We want that to be 33% by 2020, which is a challenge for business, because that will mean that they have to start recruiting one woman for every two places that come through. It is a challenge and I hope that the business community will live up to it.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): The Minister is quite right: this is about changing the culture of organisations. Will she therefore congratulate the Conservative party whose own gender pay gap figures show a 15.7% gap in favour of women?

Victoria Atkins: I hesitate to say this, but we are leading the way not only when it comes to the pay gap in our central office, but in terms of female leadership of our party and of the country.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The reason why I fought so hard as a Minister in the coalition Government to win the battle to introduce gender pay gap reporting—despite the Minister's obvious commitment to this today, my goodness it was a battle with No.10 at the time—is that the visibility and transparency of hard numbers help to pierce the bubble of complacency in boardrooms, in newsrooms and in our living rooms where some people still think that we live in a world of gender equality. What concrete action are the Government taking to help employers understand that the gender pay gap is about unequal pay and so much more? It is about the fact that jobs in care and other roles are undervalued and low paid because they are predominantly done by women. It is about the 54,000 women a year who lose their job because they have a baby. It is about the toxic workplace cultures where the boys' clubs make the decisions and sexual harassment is endemic. Time is up on pathetic excuses. It is time that organisations got serious about action.

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady and hope that she will forgive me for not including her in my roll-call of honour of female Members who have helped on this issue. She is right that we need to say to organisations, “Look, you need to do more.” I am pleased that companies have followed our best practice guidance so that, alongside reporting the gender pay gap, they have set out their action plan for how they intend to tackle it. We have seen some interesting plans—for example, from easyJet for rebalancing the number of female pilots in its workforce. This is part of the overall programme, along with our expectation about executive positions and addressing a lot of the pipeline issues. For example, we know that the choices that girls and young women make at school and university dictate their career path, so we need to encourage them into science, technology, engineering and maths.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The World Economic Forum does an annual survey of the gender pay gap in 200 different countries. I am very pleased that the UK ranks in the top 10% in the world, although much more can obviously be done. Will the Minister look at the recommendation of the charity Bliss, to give more support to mothers of very premature babies? They are a small number of women who could do with some extra help.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend raises a sensitive issue in her usual sensitive manner. Of course I will look into it. So many issues can impede the career path of a woman or, indeed, a man. It is in the best interests of businesses to find the flexibility to be able to encompass such sensitivities as and when that flexibility is needed. Flexible working really does pay in results for businesses.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is now over 40 years since a heroine of mine, Barbara Castle, introduced the Equal Pay Act. She did so with great support from the labour and trade union movement, because the principle that women should be paid the same for doing the same job as men was believed then. Forty years later, we are really no nearer to achieving that pay equality. Although it is important that we have seen transparency, it has laid bare the size of the task. Allowing enforcement mechanisms so that the existing law can actually be enforced is crucial, so that women who are illegally sacked for being pregnant can use the law to get proper redress and so that we can drive out this direct discrimination, which has been illegal for years. Does the Minister understand that?

Victoria Atkins: I commend the hon. Lady’s passion on the issue. Of course, equal pay has been the law for 40 years. Paying people unequally for the same or similar work is unlawful. We are currently seeing the impact that inequality has on workforce morale in various organisations, let alone the anger that individual women feel when inequality comes to light. The gender pay gap provisions obviously deal with the pay gap—unequal pay for the same or a similar job is dealt with under separate legislation. I think that Wendy Olsen’s report in 2010 defined the second highest factor impeding women’s participation in the workforce as “unknown”, which we know is direct and indirect discrimination, so we need to ensure that women are aware of their rights. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has the

powers set out under the Equality Act 2010, and we will be looking at how powerful and effective those powers are.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Is not the key point that this is the very first reporting that has been required? It is the start of a process that can be developed. Although the criterion of companies having more than 250 employees accounts for 40% of employment and 49% of turnover, there is an acceptance that that threshold number of employees should be decreased. Does the Minister agree, however, that it should be a gradual decrease over time?

Victoria Atkins: Yes, this is the first year. As of this month, we are having a conversation about the pay of more than 10,000 private sector businesses and more than 1,600 public sector organisations. We are also reviewing their data, which simply was not there a year ago, let alone 10 years ago. Although I absolutely understand the impatience in the Chamber to get this issue sorted as quickly as possible, we have to be realistic. Rome was not built in a day. We need to be sure about action plans.

Ms Angela Eagle: It’s the law.

Victoria Atkins: I completely agree; it is the law. But we need to review the action plans and the evidence. We have to give ourselves a bit of time to see what the data says and what lessons we need to learn from that data.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I hope the Minister will agree that it was revealing to see that job segregation by gender has an impact on pay. I hope she will also agree that the opportunity to change that is in our hands today, with apprenticeships. This is urgent. It is disappointing that the Government have not set a target for tackling gender segregation when it comes to apprenticeships, although they do have a target, which I support, for encouraging more people from ethnic minorities into apprenticeship roles. Will the Minister look into this issue and discuss with her colleagues whether more should be done to tackle the gender imbalance in apprenticeships across different sectors, and will she write to me with her findings?

Victoria Atkins: I will happily write to the right hon. Lady about those conversations. We are conscious of this issue, particularly in the STEM subjects, which is why we have committed in the careers strategy to improving STEM careers advice in schools. We are also ensuring that girls and women are being encouraged into the STEM subjects as much as possible, but of course it is not just about STEM. The right hon. Lady’s point about apprenticeships is important; I will take that away with me.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Mandatory reporting requirements are an important step in eliminating the gender pay gap, but does my hon. Friend agree that it will be key for shareholders and customers, as well as employees, to hold businesses to account on those reports?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head when it comes to cultural change. I very much hope that women employees and shareholders are looking at the performance of their companies and asking themselves, “Is this how we want this company to

behave?" Let us be clear: more than 10,000 businesses have been having a conversation about this issue at board level in a way they simply would not have been a year ago. I am keen that we look at this not just in terms of regulations, but in terms of cultural change and cultural ambition.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for asking this urgent question and for starting us off with her characteristic insight, constructive challenge and no-nonsense approach to the issue.

For employers with a particularly large gender pay gap, would the Minister consider exploring a threshold above which an organisation would be required to publish an action plan for closing or reducing that gender pay gap?

Victoria Atkins: We have thought about this carefully. At the moment, we are saying that it is best practice for companies to publish action plans, and a lot of companies are doing so. I want to take businesses with us. I do not want to set the Government's face against them. We want this change to happen and we know that the public will exist, so although we are advising organisations to publish action plans as best practice, that does leave us with options should companies not choose to follow that guidance.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I feel compelled to advocate on behalf of the men who work at Personnel Hygiene Services Ltd, where my wife works, who are paid 6.3% less than the women—we do not want to forget about the men. I appreciate what the Minister has said, but will she commit to naming and shaming companies that do not file their returns? This has gone on long enough, and we need to be aggressive in narrowing the pay gap.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend shows his customary courage in saying that during this particular UQ. The information on naming and shaming is actually out there already—in case anyone has not had the chance to look at it, the names of the companies that have reported, and all their details, are on the gov.uk website. Indeed, when I had the pleasure of appearing before the Treasury Committee, I encouraged colleagues across the House to look at the gov.uk website to see for themselves whether large employers in their constituencies have complied, because I would hope that they would want to encourage those employers to follow the law and report their findings. At this stage, after the deadline, compliance is a matter for the EHRC, which has a range of powers and has considered the issue very carefully. It has published its action plan, and it will be for the EHRC to decide the best action in relation to each and every company.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): It is estimated that 1,557 companies employing more than 250 people had not reported their gender pay gap by the deadline. Precisely what penalties will affect those companies, which did not report on time and therefore broke the law?

Victoria Atkins: As I said, the EHRC has set out its action plan, because it rightly has responsibility for enforcement after the deadline. It wrote to all the companies

that had not complied on Monday 9 April. Since that date, more companies have complied. Let us not forget that it is not necessarily a question of businesses saying, "We have 250 or more employees—this is our gender pay gap." Some of them will fall just shy of the threshold and so may declare themselves as not meeting the criteria. However, since that letter has gone out, their numbers may have gone up. We are reviewing this very carefully, and the EHRC has set out what it plans to do over the next 28 days in reviewing companies that have not complied and what it will do thereafter.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Would it not further focus minds if companies were required to provide an action statement along with the numbers that are being reported?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend highlights a point that has been raised before. At this stage, we are saying that it is best practice. The advantage of that, I hope, is that we bring businesses with us. In fairness, the vast majority of businesses want to do this. Let us not pretend that those in the corporate sector in the UK are against doing it—they are not. Indeed, the fact that the vast majority of them reported on time—indeed, some of them reported way ahead of time—suggests that they want to do it. That is because businesses know, as McKinsey's most recent report showed, that if we sort out the gender gap, it has the potential to add £150 billion to our economy. That is a figure that we, and companies, are most interested in.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I am ambitious, just as the Minister is, to change the culture. However, we are a very long way from that. What are the Government going to do to make it easier for women who now know what they have long suspected to raise this issue? The #PayMeToo campaign set up by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and many other women across this House has shown that it is not that women are not asking; they are asking, but the culture in their organisations does absolutely nothing to support any change. It is not the fault of women. What can we do for women who are currently being silenced?

Victoria Atkins: I would ask for the help of colleagues across the House. If they know of such employers in their constituencies, or indeed constituents who are employed by companies that are not acting in their best interest, then I ask them to please write to me or stop me in the corridor. I will always be happy to hear about it.

This is a matter of compliance for the EHRC. I think that as time goes on, the swell of public opinion will cause the companies in question, which do not have the good will of the public behind them, to really examine their conscience. We know that happened during the reporting period—there were instances where companies' results came in, they were put on to gov.uk, the EHRC and the Home Office said, "Come on, that doesn't look right", and then the companies re-submitted their reports. Public power, I think, has a great deal to play in this.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I raised the Iceland example with the Government some time ago and was simply told

[Drew Hendry]

that unequal pay is already against the law, but that does not cut it: women are still losing out. Will the Government look again at Iceland and independent certification for companies above a certain number of employees?

Victoria Atkins: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on being so far-sighted in his question. I am very happy to look at Iceland's self-certification. I repeat that this is the first year that this has happened. We have conducted a world-leading exercise, led from the top by the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who both share a great passion about this. We will review the data and then see what more needs to be done.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I was very pleased to hear the Minister talk about shared parental leave as a potential way of closing the gender pay gap. However, the number of dads and partners who are taking it seems to have stalled at 2%. A recent survey by the Campaign for Parental Pay Equality has shown that 80% of the self-employed and freelancers would take it if they were offered it. Opening it up to freelancers could mean that it is an engine for change to drive through the cultural change that we need in our society. With that in mind, would the Minister support my "selfieleave" Bill—the Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Extension) Bill—which would extend it to freelancers? Will she work with me to persuade the Chancellor that in the autumn, this small and inexpensive tweak would mean that the burden of childcare does not fall on the shoulders only of women?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I note that my very able Treasury colleague, the Economic Secretary, is sitting next to me and has heard her question. I am really proud that in 2015 we introduced shared parental leave and pay, which enables working parents to share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay in the first year. In February, we launched a joint campaign with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to promote shared parental leave, because we get the point that awareness of it is not particularly high. That is why we have invested in spreading awareness of it.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Along with outrageous direct discrimination on pay, this reporting also highlights, as the Minister has indicated, persistent under-representation of women at the top level in organisations. Does she agree that this not only amounts to an injustice but is also economically stupid, because we are failing to make use of our human capital? We need to get the message out there that not acting on this is both wrong and stupid.

Victoria Atkins: The right hon. Gentleman has identified a very important point. In a recent report, McKinsey estimated that businesses that have more diversity in their leadership and senior positions add up to 15% to their turnover compared with their competitors that do not have that diversity. The message to businesses is very clear: have a diverse and qualified range of workers, because that will help your business—and of course it will help the wider economy and our society as well.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister talks about wanting women, and indeed men, to be able to use this data to have conversations in their workplace. Just two weeks ago, a cross-party group of us set up the #PayMeToo campaign precisely to help women and men to do that and to make sure that they know their rights in being able to have these conversations at work. We have already had hundreds of reports back from our anonymous survey of the experiences they have had. Women are being told by their employers to raise their grievance with HR if they want to talk about these issues, being told that their careers could be damaged by talking about them, and being told, "Don't worry—we'll just employ some more junior men to even out the figures." There is a clear difference between what is happening on the frontline and what the Minister is talking about.

Will the Minister join me and other parliamentarians in encouraging people to use our anonymous paymetoo.com website to report details? Will she meet us to go through the findings and look at what we can do to make sure that the culture is changing on the ground, that men's and women's rights to speak up on these issues are protected in the workplace and that we finally close the gender pay gap?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady brings her usual passion and strength of argument to the House. I will be delighted to meet her to discuss this. I am most interested to hear about that campaign. She and other colleagues have rightly raised the question how we ensure that women feel empowered to raise issues in their workplace. I note the insightful contribution of the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham with regard to the role that trade unions play. I very much share the hon. Lady's commitment, and I would be delighted to meet her.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is wonderful to see such a sisterly and, I hope, brotherly approach to the gender pay gap, because if we are to eradicate this social evil, it is very important that women and like-minded men work together. It is good to see that more than 10,000 firms have reported their figures, but what decisive steps will the Government take to ensure that those that have not reported do so? What precise punitive measures will the Government introduce for firms that do not comply?

Victoria Atkins: The Act and the regulations place the responsibility for compliance with the EHRC. The EHRC is independent of the Government, but of course we work with it and watch its movements with great interest. It has set out its strategy for dealing with non-compliance. As I said, it wrote to businesses on 9 April, which has helped some to report. I understand that it has given businesses 28 days to comply or to flag up problems—for example, if they do not understand how to use the system or if they are not meeting the criteria for the number of employees—and thereafter the EHRC will look at each company that has not complied and decide what will happen.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Minister knows of my concern about the gender pay gap in the financial services sector. I want to give her the opportunity to send a message to banks today by answering this

question—a one-word answer is all that is needed. Should they be telling members of their staff who are concerned about the gender pay gap that they ought not to talk to one another about their personal pay?

Victoria Atkins: No, they should not be doing that.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the Minister's comments about the need to encourage women to visit websites such as *paymetoo.com* and to come forward and talk to their employers. Does she agree that something also needs to be done to make it clear to employers that this is not acceptable and that some steps might have to be taken to prevent employers from discouraging women from coming forward and talking about the gender pay gap?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. That is what I mean when I talk about a national conversation. We are now talking about the treatment of women and of workforces generally in a way that we were not a year ago. That is why auditing where we are with the gender pay gap, reviewing the evidence and working out an action plan is the way forward.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is all very well to go after big businesses, top FTSE companies and boardrooms, but there is a much greater number of women in social care, catering and hospitality who feel isolated because they rely on agencies. Will the Government focus their attention more on that end of the scale and end the scandal of zero-hours contracts, which hit women so hard in those sectors?

Victoria Atkins: We focus on all sectors, all parts of the economy and all levels of pay. The press and colleagues throughout the House tend to talk about things such as

the Hampton-Alexander review, which I appreciate is not in any way reflective of everyone, but it is important because it is about leadership at the top, from which will flow the expectation of a diverse workforce. We are very clear: we are absolutely not ignoring the women whom the hon. Lady describes. That is why we took the extraordinary step of introducing the national living wage, which was increased in April, enabling more women to find work. That is along with all the childcare help we are providing; we are spending more on childcare than any Government before us—£6 billion. This is all part of a plan to help women into the workforce, so that they have the financial independence they need.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): The EHRC has faced savage cuts under both this Government and the coalition Government. Does the Minister genuinely believe that the EHRC has the resources to enforce compliance, or is she passing responsibility without passing the cash?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The EHRC is to receive £17.4 million in 2019-20. I have spoken to the chief executive about the gender pay gap compliance issue. Of course we will keep in mind the EHRC's responsibilities, but at the moment we are clear that that sum of money should be sufficient to enable it to do the work necessary to help with compliance.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Before I call the next urgent question, could I exhort colleagues to stick to the time limits that are prescribed in relation to these mechanisms and encourage people to be as pithy as they can be? We have a very important matter now of which to treat—I cannot guarantee that everybody who wants to contribute will have the chance to do so—but there is also substantial business afterwards, and I am sure everyone will want to be considerate not only of their own interests but of others'.

Leaving the EU: Scotland and Wales Continuity Bills

1.35 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Attorney General if he will make a statement on the Government's position on the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland) Bill and the Law Derived from the European Union (Wales) Bill.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The continuity Bills—that is, the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland) Bill and the Law Derived from the European Union (Wales) Bill—passed, as the hon. and learned Lady knows, through the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly on 21 March. As she also knows, the Scotland Act 1998 and the Government of Wales Act 2006 provide the Law Officers with the power to refer to the Supreme Court the question whether devolved legislation falls within legislative competence. That power enables us to fulfil our constitutional roles in upholding the rule of law and monitoring the boundaries of the devolved settlements in the interests of legal certainty.

The continuity Bills raise serious questions about legislative competence that need to be explored. That is apparent from the view of the Scottish Presiding Officer at introduction that the Scottish Bill was not within the legal scope of the Parliament, and the recognition of the Presiding Officer of the Welsh Assembly that the assessment of competence in relation to the Welsh Bill was not a “straightforward” decision,

“as it was recognised that there are significant arguments both for and against legislative competence existing for this Bill.”

The key purpose of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill before this Parliament is to provide certainty across the UK on day one after exit from the EU, and the Scottish and Welsh continuity Bills would frustrate that objective. If the continuity Bills were to become law, there would be impacts not just on the Governments and legislatures but on the widespread understanding of and confidence in UK law after exit. The UK Government and the Scottish and Welsh Governments therefore agree that the best place for the provisions to ensure legal certainty after exiting the EU is in the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, and we are working hard across Governments to reach an agreement on how that might best be achieved.

However, the four-week statutory limit for making a reference closed yesterday, and an agreement has yet to be struck, so the Law Officers have made references to the Supreme Court in relation to both Bills, as a protective step in the public interest towards upholding legal certainty. This is therefore now a matter for the Supreme Court to determine. However, I remain hopeful that the ongoing negotiations with the devolved Administrations will result in an agreement. It is clear that that would be the best outcome for all involved. Should an acceptable agreement be reached and should the Scottish and Welsh continuity Bills consequently not take effect, the UK Government would seek to withdraw the references.

Joanna Cherry: I thank the Attorney General for his answer. These combined challenges are unprecedented in the 20-year history of devolution. Indeed, it is the first time that the UK Government have challenged legislation passed by the Scottish Parliament.

The Scottish Parliament's Bill was passed by an overwhelming majority of 95 votes to 32. Only the Tories and one Liberal Democrat did not support the Bill. The rest of the Parliament—the Scottish National party, the Labour party, the Greens and the rest of the Lib Dems—supported the Bill. Scottish Ministers are satisfied that the Bill is within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament. In that view, they have the support of Scotland's most senior Law Officer, the Lord Advocate.

The purpose of the Bill passed by the Scottish Parliament is to prepare for the consequences for devolved powers of UK withdrawal, and it is designed to work with the Westminster EU (Withdrawal) Bill. Can the Attorney General tell the House why this Tory Government are seeking to defeat a Bill in the courts that they could not defeat by democratic means in the Scottish Parliament? Does he agree that working with the Scottish Government and Parliament to resolve those political differences is preferable to resorting to law? Does he appreciate that this will widely be seen as an attack on the Scottish Parliament and the democratic legitimacy of the devolved settlement? Finally, how much will this cost and who will meet the legal costs?

The Attorney General: I agree with the hon. and learned Lady that the situation is unprecedented. She is right that no reference to the Supreme Court about Scottish legislation has previously been brought. However, she will recognise that that is not the only unprecedented factor here. As she knows, it is also the first time the Scottish Parliament has been prepared to proceed in the face of the advice of its Presiding Officer that the Bill is not within its competence. History is being made in more than one way.

I recognise that, as the hon. and learned Lady said, the Lord Advocate is of the view that the Bill is within competence, and I am heartened by her confidence in the unassailable wisdom of Law Officers, but she will recognise that this is not the only view and that legitimate questions have arisen about the Scottish Parliament's competence to pass the legislation. Law Officers in the United Kingdom, in accordance with our powers under the devolution settlement, are seeking to refer those questions.

The hon. and learned Lady says that the continuity Bills mirror the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, but she will recognise that there are significant differences between them. Those differences create the difficulty about legal certainty. We cannot have two versions of rules operating at the same time. That needs to be resolved.

Finally, the hon. and learned Lady said that we are seeking to defeat a Bill in the courts that we could not defeat in the Scottish Parliament. I gently point out that a substantial part of the Bill that was certainly passed in the Scottish Parliament was a rerun of amendments that she sought and failed to get passed in this House. As I said, there is more than one way of looking at the position. I hope that she and her colleagues would accept that there is a legitimate dispute, at least about competence, and that it is in accordance with the devolution settlement that the Supreme Court resolves it, unless we can do so by negotiation. I fervently hope that that is the case, because I agree with her that that would be a far better way forward.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the people of Scotland have voted to stay in the United Kingdom, the United Kingdom has voted to leave the European Union, the people of Wales have voted to leave the EU, and he is trying to implement the democratic will of the British people?

The Attorney General: I certainly agree that, whatever the views of any Member of this House, the practical reality is that, before the UK has another opportunity to consider whether Scotland, Wales or anywhere else should be independent, the UK will leave the EU. We therefore need to address the questions that arise about a workable system of rules, regulations and laws that will apply on the day we leave. That is what the withdrawal Bill seeks to do, and the complications that the continuity Bills cause simply have to be addressed.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) for applying for the urgent question and you, Mr Speaker, for granting it.

The UK Government's challenge to the legality of the emergency Brexit Bills passed by the devolved Governments in Scotland and Wales rightly merits consideration in this House. Crucial policy areas currently dealt with in Brussels, such as agriculture, food labelling and air quality, are affected. They will have a great impact on people's lives in the years ahead.

On those EU powers in devolved areas, there has been widespread concern for some time that Brexit legislation affecting the devolved Governments will be used as an opportunity for a power grab by the UK Government.

I ask the Attorney General to answer a number of questions. First, can he confirm the estimated legal costs of the challenge being brought by the UK Government? Secondly, will he confirm, even at this stage, whether a flexible approach can still be taken to finding a settlement that would resolve the matter? Crucially, does he agree that protecting our devolution settlement is vital and that, on UK-wide matters such as these, reaching solutions by consensus is the better way by far of resolving things? Finally, will he commit to withdrawing his referral to the Supreme Court if the hoped-for consensus is achieved through the Joint Ministerial Committee?

The Attorney General: Let me deal with the hon. Lady's questions in turn. I apologise to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who also raised the question of costs, which I did not address. I cannot give a figure for how much the challenge will cost, but hon. Members will recognise that, where there is a legitimate question about a devolved Administration's competence to do what they have done, the devolution settlement provides for a mechanism, which we are using here. It is therefore envisaged in the settlement that where a problem occurs, that is how we deal with it. I do not deny that there will be a cost, but it is part of the devolution settlement that that is how we should resolve disputes when they arise.

The hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) asked me about the necessity for a flexible approach to settlement, and I agree. Certainly as far as the UK Government are concerned—and, I believe, as far as devolved Governments

are concerned—that is very much the spirit in which the continuing negotiations are being approached. I remain optimistic, and I hope others are too, that we can settle the matter in that way.

The hon. Lady said that it was crucial to protect the devolution settlement. Again, I make the point that the process that we are undergoing is part of the devolution settlement. It is the mechanism that the devolution settlement set out for dealing with such concerns.

On withdrawal of the reference, I hope I made the position clear in my initial remarks. If we can reach an acceptable agreement—I very much hope that we will—and, flowing from that, the continuity Bills in Scotland and Wales no longer have effect, the Government would seek to withdraw the references.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I assure my right hon. and learned Friend that, from my experience, in private the Scottish and Welsh Governments are considerably more constructive and realistic in approaching the post-Brexit devolution settlements than some of the rhetoric I suspect we are about to hear would suggest. Does he agree that they are being constructive and realistic because establishing a decent settlement is hugely in the interests of the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland? The biggest threat to those countries' prosperity is anything that damages the UK single market.

The Attorney General: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend, to whom I pay tribute for his considerable involvement in the hard and mostly unrecognised work of the negotiation. He is right: in the end, we seek to get to a place where we recognise that there must be an enforceable and workable UK-wide market. When that requires that powers do not go to devolved Administrations, we will seek to reach a settlement by agreement. I hope that we will reach such an agreement soon.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I advise the House that I am looking to move on no later than 2.10 pm, so some people might not get in, particularly if other people contribute in such a way that prevents them from doing so.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): This is a shambolic mess entirely of the Government's making. They could have accepted amendments in this place or tabled amendments in the other place, but they did not. They could have attempted to find consensus on a cross-party basis, but they did not.

The Attorney General mischaracterised what the Presiding Officer of the Welsh Assembly said. She said that the Bill was within the Assembly's competence. Even UKIP Assembly Members voted for it—Neil Hamilton said that it did not in any way block the Brexit process.

The Attorney General: No, I did not mischaracterise what the Presiding Officer of the Welsh Assembly said. Although the hon. Gentleman is right that she concluded that the Bill was within competence—I did not deny that—I made it clear that she said that there were arguments in both directions. The point that we have made about the references is that, where there is lack of

[The Attorney General]

clarity and serious questions about whether a Bill or part of it is within competence, the devolved settlement makes it clear that it is for the Supreme Court to resolve the matter. That will now happen. I hope that the hon. Gentleman accepts that we are not attempting to undermine the devolved settlements but to ensure that they are operating as intended.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What elements of the proposed Scottish legislation were rejected as amendments in this House?

The Attorney General: The SNP sought, as part of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, to impose requirements that Scottish Ministers would be able effectively to veto the process of dealing with incompatible EU law after the point of exit. They returned to that, as they are entitled to do, in the course of passing their own continuity Bill in the Scottish Parliament. The difficulty we now have is that in our view the methods they have chosen raise very real questions as to whether in doing so they exceeded the competence of the Scottish Parliament. That is what the Supreme Court, if necessary, will need to resolve.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): This is quite extraordinary. There is only a question about this legislation because the Tories have chosen to question it. They have been democratically defeated in the Scottish Parliament by an overwhelming majority and are now showing their utter contempt for Scottish democracy by seeking to have that democratic decision overturned in the courts. First the power grab, now this. Is it any surprise that the Scottish people will never, ever trust the Scottish Tories with the future of our national Parliament ever again?

The Attorney General: I think we will pass over, because it will take too long, how anyone can define as a power grab a situation where one at least retains powers already devolved and probably has a lot more. Leaving that to one side, there is no contempt here—quite the reverse. As I said, what is happening is entirely within the devolution settlement set out in the Scotland Act and the Government of Wales Act. That is what we are doing to resolve what I would have thought sensible members of the SNP would accept is an undeniable controversy. There is more than one view on competence. That is apparent, because the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament did not just say that there were questions; he concluded that those questions could be answered only by saying that the Bill was not within competence.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): My colleagues and I have been concerned that the SNP's continuity Bill is a political manoeuvre designed to create precedent for legislation on a second independence referendum. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is time for the SNP to put this grievance to one side and to get serious about working together as one team for the best possible Brexit deal for Scotland and the United Kingdom?

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend. That is what we should be aspiring to: a workable situation where we can have a system of laws that works

on the day after we leave. That is what we owe to all our constituents in whatever part of the United Kingdom they may live.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I rise to pay tribute to my Plaid Cymru colleague Steffan Lewis AM, who built cross-party consensus in our Assembly for our continuity Bill. I wish Steff well in recovery from serious illness.

Devolution means divergence. Devolution means difference. Why does the Attorney General seek to deny that, knowing as he does that he calls into question the very concept of devolution?

The Attorney General: Again, I do not call into question the concept of devolution—quite the reverse. I seek to assert the provisions of the devolution settlement that enable us to resolve such disputes when they occur. There is undoubtedly a dispute. I am surprised to hear Opposition Members even dispute that there is a dispute. It seems to me that that bit, at least, is pretty obvious.

On the hon. Lady's point, I accept that there will be differences of approach to devolution. Where the devolution settlements allow for differences in approach, that is perfectly reasonable. What we are talking about, however, is the capacity for the Government to say not just to us in Parliament but to individuals and businesses around the country, that they can be sure what the arrangements will be on the day after we leave the European Union. There simply cannot be two competing versions of that in place at one time. That does not accord with legal certainty and it is that which we seek to address, aside from the very real questions about legal competence, which in the end, if necessary, the Supreme Court will have to decide.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) talks about democracy. It is important to remind the House that more people in Scotland voted to leave the European Union than voted for the SNP in the general election. When we talk about respecting democracy, the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament ruled this out of order. The SNP is showing not respect to the devolved Parliament, but contempt. Will my right hon. and learned Friend work with members of the Scottish Government who are willing to be constructive to deliver the best possible result for this House and for my constituents, who, by the way, live in the United Kingdom.

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend. He is right that whatever our final judgment may be, or whatever the final judgment of the Supreme Court may be, no one should disregard the views of a Presiding Officer of a Parliament. I feel confident that I have Mr Speaker's support in saying that at least. My hon. Friend is also right about what we want. We want a negotiated settlement that is agreed between all the Governments involved. That must remain, and does remain, what we seek to achieve.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): The Minister says he is hopeful. The Minister says he is heartened. Why can the Minister not actually be helpful and recognise that in Wales we now have a reserved powers model?

We know perfectly well that agriculture, for instance, is to be decided in Wales. Why on earth can he not recognise that and why are the Government seeking to pick a fight with the Welsh people? Why do they not just get on and recognise it?

The Attorney General: No, I am afraid the hon. Lady cannot have that. First, the Government of Wales Act 2006 applies here, not the current devolution settlement with Wales. Secondly, the Government have not picked a fight with anybody. What has happened is that particular Bills have been passed—on an emergency basis, by the way—in both the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, which raise very serious questions about the competence of each to pass them. That is not just our view; it is the view of others as well. It is therefore the responsibility of the Law Officers to determine how that should be resolved. The way in which it gets resolved, as set out in the devolution settlements, is by reference to the Supreme Court. If we can avoid that, we would all like to do so. The negotiations that are under way—the reason I am optimistic and heartened is that I hope they will be successful—are a better way to do that.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Opposition Members say that this is an attack on democracy, but does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that an independent judiciary is a vital component of a strong and functioning democracy, and, given the judgment of the Presiding Officer that the Bill's introduction is outwith the competence of the Scottish Parliament, it is therefore only right that the Supreme Court itself makes a judgment on the legality of the Bill?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is right. As I said, there surely cannot be any doubt that there is a difference of view about whether the Bills are within competence or not. It is not simply the Government who have done that. The Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament has expressed the same view. To resolve the dispute, the devolved settlements are very clear: it is for the Supreme Court to do that. We make a reference so that they can, but the problem will go away if we can resolve this through negotiation. I certainly hope that we do.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Attorney General stated, along with the Advocate General for Scotland, that it was the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament's opinion that triggered the legal action in this case. Can we then be given a clear answer on why the Welsh Bill is also being challenged? If he is incorrect and if the Advocate General for Scotland is incorrect, what is the real reason for a legal challenge to Scotland's right to legislate?

The Attorney General: No, I did not say that the view of the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament triggered the reference. What I said was this: what the Scottish Parliament's Presiding Officer thinks about that is good evidence that there is a dispute that needs to be resolved—and it does. It is no good the SNP selectively quoting at us what has happened here. It is no good saying that the Lord Advocate thinks it is within competence and forgetting that the Presiding Officer does not think it is within competence. All that demonstrates—this is my point, Mr Speaker—is that there is a disagreement, and when there is a disagreement

the devolved settlement makes it very clear that it needs to be settled by the Supreme Court. Unless we can settle it another way, that is what will happen.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Attorney General is absolutely right to resist politicking by the SNP. Does he agree that there is no sense in Northern Ireland that the people there will be remotely disadvantaged by the lack of a continuity Bill?

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend, but of course there will not be a lack of a continuity Bill in Northern Ireland, because we have the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which will apply to the whole United Kingdom. The difficulty we are dealing with is that there seem to be competing versions of continuity, and we really can have only one.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The blame for this mess lies squarely with the UK Government and the Secretary of State for Scotland for rushing legislation through this place without proper amendment, as I and other Opposition colleagues warned. As the party that delivered devolution in Scotland and Wales, we are deeply concerned about this. If the UK Government's appeal to the Supreme Court is successful and devolution is therefore not presumed, what actions will the UK Government take to ensure that the Scottish Parliament's powers are protected and enhanced?

The Attorney General: It is important to be clear about the process. We are making a reference to the Supreme Court so that it can consider whether these particular Bills, one Welsh and one Scottish, are within the competence of the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Government. It is not about deciding whether devolution is or is not going to stand. It is about whether, in accordance with the provisions of the devolution settlement, these particular Bills are inside or outside competence. That is what the Supreme Court will need to do. There is a way of avoiding all this, and we have discussed it at length. If these ongoing negotiations, which involve my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland and other members of the Government, are fruitful, and I hope they will be, there will be no need for this process to be concluded. However, if there are competing versions of the way in which continuity is dealt with in legislation, in the end the system will require that to be sorted out.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Does the Attorney General agree that the SNP Scottish Government should have been focusing on their day job of delivering the best possible Brexit deal for Scotland, rather than pursuing this divisive continuity Bill?

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend. As I said, the Scottish Government are perfectly entitled to bring to their Parliament whatever legislation they wish and to argue for it, and if they can win a vote, good luck to them. But having done all that, it is bizarre in the extreme for them not to recognise that through their own actions, they have created a difference between the way in which the Scottish Government seek to deal with continuity and the way in which the UK Government have set out that they would deal with continuity. When there is a dispute, there is a way of resolving it, and that is what we are seeking to engage with.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Scottish people have been told, “They should not be leaving the UK; they should be leading the UK.” They have also been told that they are a valued and equal partner in the Union. In what way does the Minister think that launching a legal challenge to the continuity Bill that was passed by 92 votes to 32 is in keeping with what the Scots have been told?

The Attorney General: I am in danger of repeating myself, Mr Speaker, and I know you hate that, so I will not. Let me simply say this: it is all very well saying, “There is a democratic imperative to do what the Scottish Government have done because we won a vote in the Scottish Parliament,” but they are forgetting all about the fact that they lost some votes in this Parliament on more or less the same issues. There is a difference of opinion—there is no doubt about it—so how do we resolve it? The answer is that we resolve it through the mechanism that the devolution settlement sets out. That is what we seek to do unless, and this would be better, we can resolve it by agreement.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I find astonishing the level of contempt in which the SNP holds the office of the Presiding Officer—an individual whose role is to uphold the institution of the Scottish Parliament. Does the Attorney General agree that far from undermining devolution, ensuring that no Scottish Government act outwith the scope of their powers is protecting and preserving devolution?

The Attorney General: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend, and it does not seem to me that we need to invite our colleagues on the SNP Benches to agree with the view of the Presiding Officer. All we really need them to do is to recognise that his view is worthy of respect, that it is valid and needs to be considered and that it represents a clear difference of opinion on the position in this Bill.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I was delighted to hear the Minister say that in the event of a negotiated agreement between the two Governments and the Government of Wales, the references will be withdrawn. Does he agree that what we really need is that agreement between the Governments, some certainty and an end to this endless political, constitutional posturing, which is not really doing anything for the people and businesses of Scotland?

The Attorney General: I can agree entirely with the hon. Lady that an end to political posturing would be most welcome, but I suggest to her that although she is absolutely right that an agreement is desirable, all agreements require more than one side to consent to them, and we must all do our bit to make sure that agreement is reached.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will my right hon. and learned Friend assure me that this legal challenge does not alter in any way the UK Government’s intention and sincere desire to resolve the genuine issues with clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill?

The Attorney General: Yes, I can.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am afraid that we have heard quite a bit of tosh today from the Attorney General, cheered on by the alt-Brit Unionist ultras on the other side of the Chamber. Given that he has tried to stop this Parliament having a vote and has failed previously, given that he is in the middle of a power grab and given that he is now taking the Scottish Parliament’s Bill to court, does he not see why some of us think that the Government harbour views to abolish the Scottish Parliament?

The Attorney General: Well, that is a bit of a stretch, even for the hon. Gentleman—[*Interruption.*] Look, what we are doing here—[*Interruption.*] If I can just interfere in the family dispute that is going on across the Chamber at the moment—what is going on is that we are respecting the devolution settlement. I do not expect the hon. Gentleman or his colleagues to love the Scotland Act 1998, but I do expect them to have read it, and when they read it, they will see that when such disputes arise—there surely is a dispute here—a mechanism is clearly set out for resolving it. If he and we can find a better way of doing it without engaging the time of the Supreme Court, then we and no doubt the Supreme Court will be delighted, but until that agreement is reached, we have to rely on the mechanisms set out in the devolution settlement.

Mr Speaker: Yes, there has been excessive gesticulation on both sides of the House. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), though he is newly arrived in the House, is what I would call a very over-zealous gesticulator, and we do not need to see his rather eccentric arm-waving, which does not greatly advance the cause. However, having heard him prattling away for the last 20 minutes from his seat, perhaps we can now hear him on his feet.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is clear to the great Scottish public that the SNP is simply playing political games with this issue. It is trying to manufacture a crisis when there is no need for one. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the architects of devolution foresaw issues arising about competence and that the Law Officers of the United Kingdom are now following laid-out due process by referring this matter to the Supreme Court?

The Attorney General: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): At Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister said, “It is important that we recognise the independence” of another country’s judiciary. After the Conservatives lost the argument and a vote in the Scottish Parliament, does this referral not highlight the necessity of an independent Scottish judiciary with its own Supreme Court and an independent Scottish Parliament whose democratic decisions are not undermined and overruled by a so-called equal-partner Government in London?

The Attorney General: No, I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood. The dispute is not about how many votes the proposals that he is talking about got. The argument here is that once they have passed the Scottish Parliament, we have a real question about

whether there was in fact competence to pass them at all. That is the issue that in the end the mechanisms require the Supreme Court to resolve, unless we can do it a better way.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The SNP does not listen to the Presiding Officer in the Scottish Parliament and it does not seem to be listening to the answers from the Attorney General today. Can my right hon. and learned Friend reiterate that we could have avoided this whole issue if the SNP had put more focus on getting the best possible deal for Scotland, rather than on its narrow-minded party-politicking with its divisive continuity Bill?

The Attorney General: I think that would be a better way forward, and I hope it is the way taken.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Do the Government not accept that this “legal uncertainty”, as it is called, is causing enormous concern to the business community? Would it not be better for the Government to recognise that there is a political choice that needs to be made and that the onus is on them to make it in favour of the devolution settlement?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman is right that, as I have said, we need to provide certainty wherever we can, and he is right too that there is a political job to be done as much as there is a legal one. I have indicated to him that I take the view that the political way forward is better than the legal way forward, but there is a necessity to resolve the difference of opinion that currently exists over the way forward. If we cannot do that politically, we will have to do it legally, but I know which way I would prefer.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): In December, I asked the Secretary of State for Wales what he would do if he failed to gain legislative consent from Wales, and he replied, in his usual way, that he was very confident of success. And now the case is going to the Supreme Court. Is the Attorney General confident that this matter has been handled well, or even half-competently?

The Attorney General: Yes. Both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and I are optimistic, and for good reason, and we will remain so in the hope that a sensible settlement can be reached.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Attorney General accept that however Opposition Members try to dress up the legislation passed in Wales and Scotland, its real design is to thwart the will of the people in the referendum and the legislation passed in this House that gave effect to that will? Does he not also find it hypocritical that those who are complaining about the Government now taking this action to the Court to clarify the issue of competence were supportive of those who used the courts to try to overturn the referendum result?

The Attorney General: There is no doubt that the SNP does not have a great track record of accepting referendum results, but I hope very much that on this issue we will be able to find common ground. As for the UK Government—and, I still believe, the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales—that is what we will seek to do.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): To be clear, the only reason the Scottish and Welsh Governments felt obliged to pass this legislation is the failure of the Attorney General’s Government to come to an agreement with the devolved Administrations on how things should be administered post Brexit, and at the centre of that is an insistence that the devolved Governments should be subservient to his Government. Will he now proceed on the basis of partnership and co-operation to make this situation work?

The Attorney General: I do not accept that a co-operative approach is not being taken, but as I pointed out earlier, all agreements require everyone to engage and play their part. I might add, however, as he might be unaware, that in respect of every Bill that has passed through the Scottish Parliament since it has been passing Bills, the Scottish Government have taken the opportunity to share the text of the Bill with the UK Government before its legislative process, so that any questions about competence could be resolved and discussed beforehand. For the first time ever, that did not happen on this occasion. It might be that he or one of his colleagues can explain why, but it certainly does not seem to accord with the principle of maximising the opportunity for collaboration.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must now move on.

Point of Order

2.13 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister said that the decision to destroy landing cards was taken in 2009. I have had it confirmed that the Home Office briefed yesterday that the decision was taken by the UK Border Agency in 2010 and that the records were destroyed in October 2010. Can the House, the Windrush generation, the Commonwealth leaders and the country get clarification from the Prime Minister or the Home Secretary?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. The short answer is that every Member of the House takes responsibility for the veracity of what he or she says in it. If any Member feels that he or she has inadvertently erred, that Member is responsible for the correction of the record. The matter to which she refers is, as we all know, a very public matter about which opinions have been aired in this Chamber and beyond. If it transpires that the record needs to be corrected, I trust that it will be, and I am grateful to her for taking the proper opportunity to air her concern.

Access to Fertility Services

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

2.14 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about access to NHS fertility services, including equality of access to such services across England; to make provision about pricing of such services; to provide for a minimum number of fertility treatments to be available to women on the basis of their age; and for connected purposes.

I first became aware of the totally unequal nature of access to IVF in 2016 when I was contacted by constituents who had been refused treatment because of arbitrary criteria, with couples being judged on the basis of such things as past relationships. Apparently, if one partner has had a child from a previous relationship, no matter how long ago or what their level of contact, that serves as grounds to deny treatment. Similarly, some clinical commissioning groups are starting to introduce restrictions based on the male partner's body mass index. Such arbitrary and perhaps rather moralistic judgments have no clinical basis.

As I looked at the situation, I found that the provision of fertility services in England varied considerably and that the number of CCGs restricting or completely decommissioning their services had increased dramatically since 2014. I am left wondering how it can be right that people in Thurrock and Luton—good luck to them—have access to comprehensive fertility services while my constituents and many others get a much poorer deal because of where they live.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence issued guidelines on fertility treatment in 2004 that clearly stated that women under the age of 40 who had failed to get pregnant after two years of trying should be offered three full cycles of IVF. An update in 2013 further clarified that women between the ages of 40 and 42 who met other specific criteria should have access to one full cycle. As members will know, however, NICE recommendations are not binding, and according to the charity Fertility Fairness, which compiled data for all 208 CCGs in England, only 12% of CCGs provide three full cycles, which is half the number offering them in 2013.

Seven CCGs have completely decommissioned their IVF services. Those who live in the areas covered by the Herts Valleys, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Croydon, South Norfolk, Mid Essex, North East Essex and Basildon & Brentwood CCGs are effectively denied IVF on the NHS. Most CCGs offer just one cycle of IVF, and some of these offer only a partial cycle. NICE has repeatedly advised that a full cycle should include one round of ovarian stimulation followed by the transfer of any resultant fresh and frozen embryos. When IVF is delivered in this way, the treatment is both clinically and cost-effective, but when the advice is ignored, the cost to the NHS probably outweighs its effectiveness. I guess that this amounts to saving money by wasting money. Only four CCGs in England follow the NICE fertility guidelines in full; the remaining 197 that provide some services do so in an imperfect and inefficient way. I freely admit

that NHS resources are stretched, but that is all the more reason for insisting on a consistent and cost-effective approach.

I was given assurances by the then Minister in January last year that NHS England would disseminate commissioning guidance to help CCGs. More than a year has passed, but no progress has been made. Through a parliamentary question, I learned recently of NHS England's decision not to publish guidance after all, and instead to pass the buck back to the commissioners.

The World Health Organisation is clear in classifying infertility as

“a disease of the reproductive system”,

but we are hardly treating it like other medical conditions. We should not be rationing it in this way. We need to take steps to address poor clinical decisions and the injustice that results from unequal access.

Fertility problems affect one in six couples in the UK. If left untreated, there can be serious consequences involving high levels of stress, anxiety and depression, which often lead to relationship breakdown and other long-term, chronic health conditions that require expensive lifelong treatment. It is important to remember that IVF is not an easy fix—it is hard both physically and emotionally, and not always successful—but if it is administered properly, it is a clinically effective treatment for a legitimate medical condition.

Since 2016, I have discussed this matter with four different Ministers, led a Back-Bench debate and spoken with senior officials from NHS England. As I have mentioned, there have been promises but little progress, and almost every other week another CCG announces plans to reduce or decommission its services. Approximately 17 CCGs are currently in this position. Without action, fertility treatment will be squeezed out of our NHS.

My Bill would eliminate regional variations, including the absurd use of the arbitrary access criteria my constituents have been subjected to, and ensure that all CCGs in England commission fertility treatment in line with NICE guidelines. The Bill would also pursue the development of national pricing to end the wide disparity in costs.

The price for one full cycle can range from as little as £1,343 to well over £6,000—and sometimes much more. Those high costs are used as a justification for reducing

the service, but surely it is commissioning failures that need to be tackled. It seems ridiculous that exactly the same treatment can cost the same—supposedly national—health service so much less in Newcastle than in Birmingham. Successive Ministers have confirmed that work on benchmark pricing is ongoing, but that started in 2016 and we are still to see any results. If they cannot resolve an issue like this, what faith can there be in their ability to deal with problems of a larger order?

The simple measures in my Bill would guarantee eligible patients fair and equal access to NHS fertility services wherever they live and minimise commissioning costs. Sir Bruce Keogh, the former national medical director, wrote to me in November 2017, saying:

“it remains the fact that the NHS has never been able to fund all the IVF that people would like and this is unlikely to change”.

That is small comfort to those whose needs are being ignored. I accept that resources are scarce, but surely we must not be prepared to accept that individual CCGs can ration treatment on the basis of whatever whim catches their fancy.

My Bill enjoys wide cross-party support because the issue affects people all over the country. I want to thank the constituents and campaigners, particularly Fertility Fairness and Fertility Network UK, that support the Bill and all the couples who have helped me to understand just how unjust things are. They are the victims of rules and decisions that would be completely intolerable if we were discussing any other illness. The NHS was founded on the principle that healthcare should be universal, comprehensive and free at the point of delivery, and as with all illnesses, fertility treatment should be dependent on a person's medical need, not their postcode or ability to pay. Infertility is a medical condition, and it is time that we started treating it like one.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Steve McCabe, Kate Green, Paula Sherriff, Joan Ryan, Ann Coffey, Mr Edward Vaizey, Tom Brake, Layla Moran, Jim Shannon, Andrew Selous and Will Quince present the Bill.

Steve McCabe accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 196).

Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

2.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

We can be proud of the safety culture across our transport sector in recent years, but we cannot be complacent and we want to maintain and improve safety standards. That is why we have to look at new areas where legislation is needed, and one of them is strengthening the rules against the minority of thoroughly irresponsible people who shine lasers at aircraft. At the same time, we will make it an offence to shine a laser at cars, trains, ships and air traffic control for the first time.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will not the Bill throw into doubt the long-established police practice of an officer on foot jumping into the highway and waving a torch at a motorist in order to stop a vehicle? Would that not be an offence under the Bill because a strict liability offence is proposed, as I understand it, or does my right hon. Friend expect the police to have to pray for salvation and to rely on clause 1(2) to argue that they have a defence?

Chris Grayling: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that point, which may have been a request to join the Committee and argue about it in great detail. I argue that any potential law and order intervention would judge there to be a key difference between a torch and the modern laser pen that is causing such issues and on which, particularly in relation to aircraft, we need the law to be substantially strengthened.

Sir Greg Knight: I am sorry to labour the point, and I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. That is what I initially thought would be the answer, but if we look at the Bill, we can see that a laser beam is defined in clause 3 as

“a beam of coherent light produced by a device of any kind”—
in other words, a torch.

Chris Grayling: I am not a physicist, but I think the key word is “coherent”, in that a beam is coherent if it focuses the light in a way that represents a danger to the public. As I have said, I encourage my right hon. Friend to join the Bill Committee—this may be one of the issues that are well worth debating—and I have no doubt that my colleagues on the Treasury Bench will be delighted to offer him such an opportunity. It is a serious point, however, and we will double-check.

I am very grateful to the other place, which has done a detailed job of scrutiny. Amendments made there have removed ambiguity and extended the provisions beyond vehicles to include air traffic control facilities. I thank my noble Friend Baroness Sugg and those in the Lords who took part in debates on the Bill, and the external stakeholders, particularly the UK Laser Working Group, that have made an important contribution to shaping the legislation.

It is important to say that there are legitimate uses for lasers. They are used as alignment aids in the construction industry, by lecturers in classrooms and by astronomers in the course of their work. We intend to legislate not

against the use of laser pointers at all, but instead against their illegitimate use. They can dazzle, distract or blind those in charge of a vehicle, with serious and even fatal consequences. We know that, in aviation, such incidents take place during take-off or landing, or when aircraft such as police helicopters are carrying out civil safety duties.

Back in 2003, 15 years ago, there had never been a reported case of a laser being shone at an aircraft. The following year there were six cases, and by 2008 there were 200. There are now 1,000 a year, as indeed there were last year. Thankfully no aircraft, train or road vehicle in this country has had an accident as a result of these dangerous and senseless acts, but it is all too easy to imagine the potential consequences—for instance, a pilot being blinded by a laser when trying to land a passenger jet, or a train driver being dazzled from a bridge and missing a signal as a result.

It is already an offence, under the Air Navigation Order 2016, to shine a light at an aircraft to dazzle or distract a pilot. However, the maximum penalty is a £2,500 fine, and we do not think the fact that this is a summary offence gives the police adequate powers to investigate and pursue it effectively. Offenders can also be prosecuted, under another air navigation order, for the offence of endangering an aircraft. That carries a maximum prison sentence of five years and a £5,000 fine, but it involves legal complications. It is sometimes difficult to prove the endangerment of an aircraft.

The Bill will simplify the position. It is a straightforward measure, which will make it an offence for a person to shine or direct a laser beam towards a vehicle if it dazzles or distracts, or if the action is likely to dazzle or distract a person in control of a vehicle. It will extend to all transport modes, will give the police the powers they need to investigate, and will provide penalties that reflect the seriousness of the offence. This will be an either-way offence, which means that it can be dealt with in the magistrates courts or, as an indictable offence, in the Crown court. It gives the police powers, under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, to enter a property for the purposes of arrest and to search a property after an arrest. Those powers are not currently available to the authorities in respect of existing aviation offences. The maximum fine will be unlimited, and the maximum prison sentence will be five years. The Bill will extend to the whole United Kingdom. We have been working with the devolved Administrations, who are very supportive, and I am grateful to them for their co-operation.

As I said at the start of my speech, the Bill has already faced scrutiny in the other place, where it received strong cross-party support. It reaches us in much better shape as a result. One of the positive additions in the other place was the extension of the provisions to air traffic control, which has a key role in our aviation sector. It is right and proper for those who attempt to shine one of these devices at an air traffic control point to be treated in the same way. That is a constructive example of the way in which debate on such Bills can improve them.

The Bill has received widespread support from both the authorities and the transport industry. The British Airline Pilots Association has welcomed its reintroduction—it was, of course, debated before the general election, but had to be set aside because there was not enough time

to proceed—saying that it is good news for transport safety. It has also been welcomed by airlines and airports, the National Police Chiefs Council, the National Police Air Service, the Military Aviation Authority, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, the Rail Delivery Group, Public Health England and the Royal College of Ophthalmologists. That is a pretty good list of supporters.

Everyone agrees that we need to do something about this problem, and everyone agrees that the actions of the small number of individuals who behave in this way are utterly unacceptable. We must give our police the powers to deal with them in the toughest appropriate manner. I hope and believe that today, in the House, we can give our support to a measure that I believe is absolutely necessary for public safety, and whose time has come.

2.33 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Labour fully supports the Bill. Our concerns about it were addressed as it made its way through the other place. However, this is not the first occasion on which I have had a strong sense of déjà vu when discussing legislation introduced during the current Session. The issues dealt with in this Bill, along with those in another two Bills that have been presented since June last year, were first put before the House more than a year ago as part of the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill. The Prime Minister's gamble in calling a snap election not only demolished her majority in this place, but had the knock-on effect of disrupting much of the business of Parliament. A host of important Bills, including the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, were dropped ahead of the election.

Having expended a great deal of parliamentary time and effort debating issues like those contained in this Bill, we were surprised to note that there was no reference to the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill in the Queen's Speech. Instead, the Government decided to take up even more parliamentary time by fragmenting the previously proposed legislation, splitting it between what became the Air Travel Organisers' Licensing Act 2017 and the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill. In fact, the Queen's Speech made no mention of laser misuse, and it was only after Labour raised the issue with the Government during the debate on the Air Travel Organisers' Licensing Bill that they introduced this Bill.

While Labour Members are happy to see these measures finally making their way into law, it is disappointing to note that 50% of the Government's transport programme during the current Parliament has consisted of clauses taken from the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, which should already have passed into law. Moreover, having introduced three separate Bills, the Government have yet to include a number of clauses from the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill that should be on the statute books by now. There has been no legislation on diversionary driving courses, and the clauses relating to air traffic services appear to have been axed as well.

All those facts only go to show that this minority Government are utterly out of ideas and cannot competently deliver those that they attempt to recycle. It is astonishing that they are willing to take up so many hours of Parliament's time with business that should have been dealt with a year ago, when such a vast number of pressing transport issues require our immediate

attention. For example, we have heard nothing from them about what action they will take to address the crisis in local bus services, the collapsing rail franchising system, the huge disparities in regional transport investment, or the air pollution that is causing 50,000 premature deaths each year. This Bill could have given them an opportunity to legislate on drones. There were 70 reported near misses with aircraft in 2016, and the number is rising year on year, but they simply have not addressed the problem at the required pace.

While it is disappointing to see the Government drag their feet on important problems relating to the transport sector, it is nevertheless a good thing that they are listening to the Labour party and legislating on laser misuse. Worryingly, we have seen a sharp rise in the misuse of lasers in recent years. According to figures released by the Civil Aviation Authority, between 2009 and 2016 there was a 70% increase in the number of incidents in which a laser was shone at an aircraft in the UK. The British Transport Police reported 578 laser incidents between April 2011 and November 2017, an average of 96 each year.

It is currently an offence only to direct or shine any light at any aircraft in flight so as to dazzle or distract the pilot of the aircraft, with a maximum penalty fine of £2,500. A suspect can be imprisoned for up to five years under the Aviation Security Act 1982 if intent to damage or endanger the safety of aircraft can be proved. The Bill will extend the offence to other vehicles, remove the cap on the amount that offenders can be fined and make it easier to prosecute offenders by removing the need to prove an intention to endanger a vehicle.

The Government have taken on board the points raised by my Labour colleagues in the other place about the definition of "laser beam" and the types of vehicles covered in the Bill, as well including a new clause making it an offence to shine a laser directly towards an air traffic control tower. The Opposition would like to put on record our gratitude for the work of our colleagues in the other place, particularly Lord Tunnicliffe, to make those significant improvements to the Bill. It is with pleasure that Labour can take responsibility for a piece of legislation that the Conservatives omitted from their programme for government and only introduced after heeding our calls. Indeed, when they did so, the work of Opposition spokespeople in the other place was required to get it into its current shape. If we were in government, we would have passed this legislation into law a year ago, and we would now be getting on with the business of implementing our policies to save local bus services, fix our railways, equalise the disparities in regional transport investment and address the air pollution crisis.

All the Conservative party has to offer are recycled bits of legislation and sticking plasters for an ailing transport system that is in need of major medical assistance. While I reiterate Labour's full support for the Bill, the transport needs of the nation are many and varied, and, sadly, the totality of the Government's legislative programme is utterly deficient in addressing them.

2.41 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State was untypically churlish, and I can only attribute that to the fact that since I left the Front Bench he has become more bombastic—I think he is missing me. He is well aware—

[Mr John Hayes]

indeed, in his final remarks he acknowledged this—that this is a Bill that any decent Government would introduce. As he said, it was the subject of considerable discussion when that earlier piece of proposed legislation was introduced and there has been a broad measure of support across the House about the need for such a measure.

The use of lasers for malevolent purposes has grown, as the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) described. These devices were virtually unknown until the early 2000s; in 2003, fewer than half a dozen cases were reported. As he said, however, by last year over 1,000 cases were reported in various ways and forms. The need for legislation is proven simply on the basis that we know that these things can be used by those with malevolent intent to do damage and that they may well get access to a device that can be bought for as little as £1 on the internet and then go about their vile business.

The bringing down of a plane is obviously one of the principal fears, but, as the Bill now recognises, there are others, too—other transport modes are vulnerable. Someone with one of these laser pens could direct it into the face of a driver of a heavy goods vehicle or at a train driver from a bridge, so it is right that the Bill addresses all the risks associated with the misuse of these devices.

As has been said, the Bill encourages the identification of such malevolence, introduces tougher penalties and makes it easier for prosecutions to take place. There is an argument for extending the powers of the police still further by extending stop-and-search to, for example, people loitering on the edge of an airport or at a railway station with the clear intention of doing harm. Perhaps the Minister will deal with that when she sums up the debate.

Burke said:

“Early and provident fear is the mother of safety.”

It is right that we should be cautious and fearful, but it is also right that we should be prepared, ready to deal with any threat to public safety. These pens can present such a threat; we know that from what all the authorities report to us. The Bill is pertinent, prescient and it deserves the support of the whole House. I was proud to be—

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Hayes: I can tell that my right hon. Friend does not want me to conclude quite so promptly, and on that basis it would be ungenerous not to give way and so extend my peroration a little further.

Sir Greg Knight: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way and join him in praising the Government for introducing this measure, but will he include himself in the congratulations, as he was an excellent Transport Minister and had a large part to play in this matter coming before us before, but unfortunately, because of the election, the Bill did not proceed into law?

Mr Hayes: My right hon. Friend is very generous and, of course, absolutely right in all that he just said, and I was just waiting for him to say it; I acknowledge that praise and thank him sincerely for what he said.

Yes, I was involved in the outset of this. The shadow Secretary of State and I rubbed along very well together when I was on the Front Bench—and we did some good work together, too—but I think it is a bit rich to say that we would not have thought of this if it was not for the Opposition. We had been discussing and planning this, considering it and plotting the right way forward, for a considerable time, and I have absolute faith in the Secretary of State and my successor as Minister to take this matter forward with the same kind of diligence and concentrated effort that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) very generously attributed to me.

2.46 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), and I join in the compliments to him: he certainly did have responsibility for the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill before June 2017 and also brought forward the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill after the last general election. He is renowned for working in a cohesive and friendly and collegiate manner, and I pay tribute to him for that.

This Bill is welcome and I am sure it will have the support of the whole House, but its progress sums up this UK Government. As we have heard, the Bill was part of the previous Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, which fell because of the Government's desperate general election strategy, so despite this new Bill supposedly being safety-critical, it is in fact the fourth Bill to be brought forward to cover the four main sections of VTAB. The timing therefore makes no sense.

We should also consider that today's Chamber business was originally a Committee of the whole House sitting, to debate the Bill's only two substantive clauses and the two clauses for definitions and extent to complete it. The whole House was supposed to discuss this four-clause Bill, yet following the Government's taking action in Syria without a parliamentary vote, they refused to bring forward a substantive motion on Syria that the whole House could debate. That sums up the UK Government; it shows how they are padding out Government time, as the shadow Secretary of State said.

I served on the VTAB Committee and heard first hand from the British Airline Pilots Association—BALPA—about the incidents and risks associated with the shining of laser pens at pilots. We also heard about the need to consider air traffic control centres, because of the dangers of their staff being blinded, so it was very surprising that it was not until Report stage of this Bill that the Government included a clause to cover this aspect.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Was my hon. Friend as shocked as I was that it took the Government so long to react to BALPA's warnings, particularly in respect of air traffic control centres?

Alan Brown: I absolutely agree, and my hon. Friend makes the point well. He, too, served on the VTAB Committee and heard that evidence first hand. The shadow Secretary of State took credit for the Labour party for pushing on that issue, but I point out that I challenged the Transport Secretary on it in relation to

the Air Travel Organisers' Licensing Act 2017. We all knew how safety-critical and important the issue was and it beggars belief that we are still only at this stage.

Figures from the Civil Aviation Authority show that more than 11,000 incidents have been reported at airports over an eight-year period. That is clearly unacceptable, and although there has been a downward trend, some 1,258 incidents were reported in 2016, so the frequency of such incidents is still much too high. Following a survey that BALPA undertook of its members, it stated: "half of our pilots reported having experienced a laser attack in the last 12 months. 15% said they had experienced three or more".

That illustrates the extent of the problem. It is not surprising, given its size, that Heathrow has been the most targeted airport. Sadly, however, Glasgow airport has been the next most targeted airport. In 2016, the number of incidents there doubled to 83, compared with 151 attacks at Heathrow. Glasgow has one fifth the number of flights of Heathrow, but more than half the number of attacks. So, on one level, the scale of the problem is much greater in Glasgow.

I support the fact that the Scottish National party and the Scottish Government are taking seriously any actions that could endanger aircraft and their crew and passengers, and the Scottish Government are strongly supporting the Civil Aviation Authority's efforts to publicise the dangers, as well as the efforts of Police Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service to deal with those who maliciously direct lasers at aircraft and to ensure that they are prosecuted. As we heard from the VTAB Committee, the existing legislation is not robust enough in terms of the need to prove intent to endanger aircraft. I am therefore more than happy to lend my support to this Bill if it will help to provide the stick to impose penalties on those who undertake such attacks.

BALPA has provided further information on the risks from the attacks. For pilots, the major concerns surrounding a laser illumination are those of startle and distraction, but they might also suffer flash blindness, after-image and glare. BALPA advises that there are four progressive stages of seriousness: distraction, disruption, disorientation and even incapacitation. Bearing in mind the most serious effects, when there is a two-man crew, it might be possible to hand over control of the aircraft to the second pilot, but even that procedure would involve risk during take-off and landing, and of course, only a two-pilot aircraft would have that luxury. Single-man aircraft, particularly helicopters, have no such luxury. If those pilots are attacked, it is a matter of the utmost seriousness. In London, in particular, police helicopters are—let us not be kidded—a target for those with malicious intent. There were even 10 laser incidents involving air ambulances in 2016. The catastrophic consequences for an aircraft are pretty obvious, so it is a minor miracle, given that there have been 11,000 incidents, that there has not been a more serious outcome following what are to all intents and purposes laser attacks.

It is welcome that the Bill covers all vehicles. The British Transport police have confirmed an average of 100 attacks a year on trains, and anyone really wanting to cause mischief will always have easy access to the road network, where they can target any random driver on the roads. It is therefore welcome that the Bill picks up on road users as well. As I have said, this is a short Bill. As I intimated earlier, it is welcome that the

Government have added clause 2, which relates to air traffic control. However, as the shadow Minister said, we also need to consider drones and the increasing danger that they present to aircraft when people use them around airports. We know that they are becoming cheaper and more accessible to people of all ages, and we really need to look at this.

We also need to look at controlling the sale of laser pens if we are going to reduce the incidence of their malicious use. Public Health England recommends that unqualified and untrained members of the public should not have access to lasers in excess of 1 mW without good reason. Despite this, it is easy to purchase hand-held lasers in excess of 4,000 times that capacity. I therefore support the fact that, following a call for evidence, the response from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy confirms that the Government will take action to improve the frequency and resourcing of enforcement activities at ports and borders with the aim of improving the safety of the market for laser pointers and increasing enforcement activities against their imports. It would be good if the Minister advised us on the timescale for this welcome additional action.

Once the Bill is introduced, the Government will have to advise us on how they will review the effectiveness of these measures and how they will consider what additional steps might be required if these measures alone are insufficient to cut down on the incidence of laser attacks. The Bill is welcome, but I ask the UK Government to consider these other measures relating to the dangers to aircraft in particular. I look forward to at last getting the Bill through and moving forward.

2.54 pm

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I am always surprised by how many people are afraid of flying, given that travelling in a plane is one of the safest things anyone can do. Travelling by car, for example, is 100 times as risky per mile as travelling in an aircraft, and travelling by motorcycle is 3,000 times as likely to kill us. The journey to the airport is likely to be the most dangerous part of someone's holiday. I was pleased to be able to join BALPA in welcoming the fact that 2017 was the safest year in history for commercial aviation. That did not happen by accident. A number of factors are involved, and the attention to detail has been important. There has always been an underlying culture of safety in the aviation industry, starting with the manufacture and maintenance of aircraft at the excellent companies we have in the UK such as Rolls-Royce, and including the training and professionalism of the crew, both on the flight deck and in the cabin, and the work done by air traffic control. I would particularly like to recognise the work that NATS has done in keeping our skies safe. Indeed, we need to see more innovation in the way our airspace is designed and optimised.

When I first arrived in this House, I became a member of the Transport Committee under the indomitable Gwyneth Dunwoody. We went on a visit to the Civil Aviation Authority, and initially I was concerned to hear about the number of reports of incidents that had been brought to the CAA. It soon became clear, however, that aviation was so safe precisely because of that culture of reporting. For example, on one flight, the pilot and the co-pilot had both eaten the same lunch—I think that they had each had a prawn sandwich—and

[Mr Robert Goodwill]

that had been recorded as a risk. Because of that recording, such mistakes could be addressed. Having that type of culture in the industry is important. Indeed, when I was the Aviation Minister, I joined Dame Deirdre Hutton, the chair of the CAA, on a ramp check to see exactly how diligently the work of checking our aircraft was being done. That culture is now being looked at by the NHS, so that if there is a mistake or a near miss in a hospital, for example, it can be learned from rather than hidden, as has been the problem.

Today, we have been hearing about the new risk—namely, the misuse of lasers, which are now much more widely accessible. Indeed, I was given one a while ago as a free gift by a political party. In 2004, there were six reported incidents, but that figure increased to more than 1,000 in 2010. When I was Aviation Minister, I met the chair of BALPA, Brendan O’Neal, who explained this to me at the same time as I was endeavouring to land a 747 in the simulator at Heathrow airport. He made it clear to me that people were concerned about this problem, because it is difficult to fly one of those things in those circumstances. He explained the danger to the aircraft and to the eyesight of the flight crews. Incidentally, I did not hit the control tower as I was coming in to land, unlike the Chancellor of the Exchequer of the time. BALPA has stated that 55% of pilots reported an attack in the past 12 months, 4% of whom had reported six or more such attacks. I therefore welcome the Bill. The Secretary of State has described how it goes further than the current measures under article 225 of the Air Navigation Order 2016, in that it covers other vehicles, as well as air traffic control and taxiing aircraft, which were not previously covered.

There is a particular problem for police helicopters. Mr Ollie Dismore, the director of operations for the National Police Air Service, was quoted in *The Yorkshire Post* in 2006 as saying that Leeds-Bradford airport, which is in my region, was the UK’s third worst airport for laser attacks on aircraft. In his 23-year career, Mr Dismore had been targeted well over 20 times himself and cited 108 reports of laser attacks on police helicopters in 2005. In the article, he described the unnerving experience of having the light bounce around the cockpit like a goldfish bowl while he was trying to fly the aircraft and look at the instruments. This is a particular problem at night, when the pilot’s pupils are dilated.

The good news is that technology in helicopters links the on-board camera to the mapping system, and the location of the perpetrator can be pinpointed and recorded. The person can even be photographed. Ground units have a good success rate of seizing the lasers and, depending on the severity of the attack, progressing the cases through the criminal justice system. Police helicopters have also been deployed in that way to tackle attacks on fixed-wing aircraft at locations such as Stansted, Gatwick and Manchester airports.

I am pleased that the measures that fell last year when the election was called will now be put on the statute book, widening the scope of the vehicles protected and toughening the penalties that can be imposed on the criminals who carry out this dangerous, malicious activity.

I want to put on the record the heavy lifting done by my noble friend Baroness Sugg, who started off her career as a staffer at the European Parliament when I

was there and has now risen to much greater heights that even I could aspire to. We appreciate the work that has been done and the improvements that the Lords have made to the Bill, and I look forward to the legislation getting on the statute book, so that our skies can continue to be as safe as they are.

3 pm

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): In answer to the point made by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), that this measure has been pushed by the Labour Opposition, I say that success has many fathers and failure has none. I refer him to my private Member’s Bill of 2016, on the regulation of sales, ownership and illegal use of laser pens. The Bill was intended to make

“the sale, ownership and use of portable laser emitting devices with output power of more than 1 milliwatt unlawful in certain circumstances; and for connected purposes.”

At that time, having looked at the matter since 2014, I was grateful to the then Lord Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), and to my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), whom it is a pleasure to follow today. During that time, he was a Transport Minister and then a Home Office Minister, and I had discussions with him about addressing the misuse of laser pens. More recently, I have had discussions with Business Ministers, because the issue of the misuse of lasers goes across the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Transport and the Ministry of Defence. I have therefore spoken to and worked with a raft of Ministers to find a coherent strategy to address the misuse of laser pens.

Mr John Hayes *rose*—

Rehman Chishti: Before I give way to my right hon. Friend, I want to say that I was also grateful to be able to make representations to him, to which I will refer later.

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend did indeed make those representations, which helped shape Government thinking. To add to the list of Departments involved in this work, I know that he would not want to miss out the Home Office. The Home Office has been engaged in this matter because, sadly, there is the potential for terrorists to take advantage of these simple devices with catastrophic consequences.

Rehman Chishti: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is absolutely right. I did make representations to him and had discussions with Home Office Ministers. Lastly, I want to thank the current Secretary of State for Transport for the time he gave me and for fully taking on board my concerns.

I of course welcome what is proposed in the Bill. When certain individuals are recklessly misusing laser pens, we want to ensure that the legislation is clear so that the police and our Crown Prosecution Service can prosecute them, and the previous legislation, the Air Navigation Order 2009, did not provide that clarity. According to the Civil Aviation Authority’s figures, there were 20 recorded incidents in 2005 and 746 in 2009. In 2010, there were 1,500. In 2011, there were 1,912, and in 2012 the number was 1,571. If we compare

that with the number of convictions under article 222 of the Air Navigation Order, we see that there were only 26 convictions from 1,500 recorded incidents in 2010. In 2011, when 1,912 incidents were recorded by the CAA, there were 48 convictions. In 2014, the number of convictions was 18, but there were 1,447 incidents. It is quite clear that the legislation to address, deter and bring to account those responsible for the misuse of lasers—those who take part in this reckless activity—did not have the necessary and desired effect.

The Bill, which will make the offence one of strict liability, meaning that the prosecution is not required to show intention, is absolutely right and proper. We need legislation to have the right deterrent effect, so the punishment needs to be commensurate with the seriousness of the offence. Previously there was only a financial penalty, which was not the right way forward. Under the new measures, the penalties have been increased to include both financial penalties and a sentence of up to five years, which most certainly is the right way forward.

A body that has not been referred to yet is the parliamentary advisory council for transport safety, which wrote to me on 19 April 2016. Its letter reads:

“On behalf of the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (All-Party Parliamentary Group), I am writing with regards to your recent Private Member’s Bill on the use of laser pens.

Between 2009 and 2015, the Civil Aviation Authority recorded seventeen reports of laser pen attacks affecting air traffic control towers in the UK.”

That point is now being addressed in clause 2—clause 1 addresses the need for clarity in legislation by making the offence one of strict liability—and I am grateful that the Secretary of State has taken on board PACTS’s representations about infrastructure. It is a wonderful organisation and does excellent work to make transport safe for everyone.

Colleagues from across the House have referred to BALPA, which is an absolutely superb organisation. It wrote to me on 14 April 2016 and said:

“On behalf of Britain’s 10,000 airline pilots I am pleased to offer BALPA’s support to you in respect of your bill to regulate the sale, ownership and usage of laser pens.”

The letter goes on to make a point that many people out there will be familiar with, which needs to be made again. It states:

“The issue has become especially important in recent months with the attack on a Virgin Atlantic aircraft which resulted in the First Officer feeling unwell and having to return to base.”

We saw the reports in the media at the time. Any one of us could have been travelling on that plane, and we have citizens who use planes on a daily basis to travel between different parts of the world or internally within the United Kingdom.

For a long time, the legislation was not fit to address this menace, and it is right and proper that we see support coming from the Scottish National party, from Labour and from the Conservative party, all working together. At the end of the day, we all have a fundamental duty to protect our citizens. Safety in transport is absolutely vital, and the Bill helps to address that. On that point, I thank BALPA and our pilots for what they do. They are exposed to risks, but they still do a brilliant job. I cannot read out BALPA’s letter in full, but I am more than happy to share it with colleagues.

I am also grateful to London City Airport, which wrote to me on 18 October 2017 in support of the

proposals to address the misuse of laser pens and with its own suggestions. One additional point that it raised was as follows:

“Another solution is to create a licensing system where an importer, retailer or consumer must obtain a licence especially for high-powered laser pointers. This will allow the Government to maintain a register of sellers and users. The licence can include a criteria relating to training or insurance, thus improving the users’ awareness of the safe use of laser pointers.”

Although this is not in the Bill, I am pleased that, following my representations to the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries and other colleagues, in January the Government announced new measures to tackle the sale of unsafe laser pointers. My 2016 private Member’s Bill would have addressed the sale of laser pens over a certain output.

First, I welcome the Government’s announcement in January—no doubt the Minister will comment further on it—that they will strengthen safeguards to stop high-powered lasers entering the country, which is absolutely right and proper. As the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) said, certain laser pointers of exceptionally high power have no legitimate purpose but are easily accessible in the United Kingdom and on the internet.

Secondly, the Government announced additional support to local authorities, ports and border teams to stop high-powered laser pointers entering the United Kingdom. Thirdly, they announced that they would work with manufacturers and retailers to improve laser pointer labelling. The Government have also looked at better policing of laser pointer sales by working with online sellers such as eBay. The problem is the same as with the purchasing of knives on the internet. We have to regulate the purchasing of laser pointers online.

Finally, the Government announced awareness raising of the risks associated with laser pointers, particularly among children, given that many do not know the dangers. We need to get the legislation right and, linked to that, we need to address the use of certain laser pens.

It would not be fair of me if I were not also to thank Heathrow Airport, which wrote to me on 4 October 2017 in support of my private Member’s Bill. The final paragraph of the letter said:

“We would welcome any improvements to the regulation governing the sale, ownership and use high powered laser pointers, such that only the legitimate sale, ownership and use of such devices is permitted. We would also support any improvements to the Air Navigation Order (2016) which make it easier for the police to enforce the legislation”.

That, to a certain extent, is covered by clause 1.

Finally, I refer back to the representations from London City Airport, and I hope the Minister will take this point forward. When I tried to obtain information on the number of incidents there had been, the difficulty I had in trying to find out the number of convictions under different categories of the Air Navigation Orders is that the Crown Prosecution Service does not keep a record of that. The numbers I gave earlier therefore related to article 222 of the Air Navigation Order 2009. The letter from London City Airport therefore said:

“However, I believe a more informed approach based on better data-sharing between the Metropolitan Police, the Government, CAA and...airports will bring transparency and clarity on the scale of the problem. This will allow the Government to implement solutions accordingly.”

[Rehman Chishti]

That would ensure that all the different organisations were working together, and it would ensure transparency of the data that was available.

I have been looking at this matter since 2014 and—this is not often mentioned—I would not have been able to get a lot of the data, research and freedom of information requests if not for my brilliant researcher Barry Watts, who no longer works for me after four years in Parliament. He has now gone on to do other things, but the research we have is down to our brilliant researchers. I thank every colleague in Parliament, including some former Ministers who have spoken today, because whenever I met them, they were absolutely brilliant in understanding that very point.

We have talked about issues with regard to airports, aeroplanes, infrastructure and railways, but in 2016 the defence air safety occurrence report recorded 250 laser-related incidents in the UK in the past five years that put our amazing, wonderful military personnel, and their work, in danger. Concerns have been raised across the spectrum, and the Bill is the right way forward, but I also ask the Minister to look at how it works over the coming years. If the Bill needs to be reviewed, and if further measures need to be taken, I ask her to work with the organisations involved to see how things can be further improved.

I thank the Minister and her team for listening and for taking on board the representations that have been made to me.

3.15 pm

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): I do not propose to speak for quite as long as my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) but, of course, he has worked very hard on this issue through his private Member's Bill, so I will whistle through my comments, many of which have been made already.

The Bill rightly covers all modes of transport, but I will confine my comments to aircraft. I spent much of my working life in aircraft engineering. I joined the Royal Air Force before moving to British Airways, where I spent more than 25 years in the industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) talked about people who have an irrational fear of flying and, although I have 25 years in the industry and have flown hundreds of times as an engineer, I am somewhat frightened of flying, too. I have spent far too long thinking about what could go wrong when I am in the air.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I am most interested in the hon. Gentleman's concern about flying. I enjoy flying but my wife will not fly, so I do understand. The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) talked about the danger per mile flown. If it were the danger per hour flown, I suspect the figures for motor travel and for flying might be a bit closer.

Royston Smith: The hon. Gentleman might be right. I did some research on the likelihood of having an accident in an aeroplane, which is why I know that my fear is irrational. Taking probability out of it, a person would have to fly every day for 15,000 years to guarantee

themselves on accident. I know that, but it does not stop my thinking about it when I hit a bit of turbulence or when I come in to land.

The first commercial flight was more than 100 years ago and, of course, this year we celebrate 100 years of the Royal Air Force. Across the world, aircraft have clocked up millions of flying hours, and lessons are constantly learned to ensure that our aircraft are as safe as possible. The last thing we need is people on the ground making what can sometimes be a dangerous form of travel even more dangerous than it needs to be.

I am not a pilot, but I know that aircraft are at their most vulnerable during take-off and landing, with by far the majority of incidents occurring during final descent and landing, so it will come as no surprise that the majority of fatalities in aircraft also happen at that time.

There is an airport on the edge of my constituency and an approach flightpath over residential areas and a school in my constituency, so this Bill is particularly relevant and important to my constituents. Aviation accidents are extremely rare and, as I have said, a person would have to fly every day for 15,000 years to guarantee themselves a crash, and we need to make sure we keep it that way. A recent report published by Boeing revealed that 48% of incidents that resulted in a fatality happened during take-off or landing. It is therefore imperative that pilots are not subjected to any unnecessary distractions while trying to land an aircraft.

If someone is foolish enough to shine a laser at an aircraft, it will have the most impact when the aircraft is coming in to land, which is the worst possible time for a pilot. I am reasonably sure that most people do not give that a second thought—why would they? Most people are not stupid enough to think it is clever to shine a light at a pilot as they come in to land. But not everyone is sensible, which is why we have to legislate. I know this has been referred to two or three times, but according to the British Airline Pilots Association there are an average of three to four reported laser attacks on aircraft daily. That simply cannot be allowed to continue.

We are talking about someone shining a laser pen at an aircraft, perhaps an Airbus A380, which could carry more than 500 passengers. Let us imagine someone shining a laser pen towards the flight deck just as the aircraft is on its final approach—the results could be catastrophic. Laser illuminations can startle and distract, and in some circumstances may result in temporary vision interference, including flash blindness, after-image exposure and glare. I do not want to labour these points, as they have already been made, but according to the Civil Aviation Authority there has been a 70% increase in laser incidents since 2009. BAPLA surveyed its members in September 2017 and reported that 50% of pilots had experienced a laser attack in the previous 12 months, with 15% having experienced three or more.

Public Health England recommends that unqualified and untrained members of the public should not have access to lasers in excess of 1 milliwatt. However, it is easy to purchase lasers far in excess of that; a basic internet search showed that I could purchase a 200 milliwatt laser for as little as £30. The existing regulation, under the Air Navigation Order, states that a person must not “recklessly or negligently” endanger an aircraft. Evidencing and proving the endangerment of an aircraft is a difficult

task for police officers, so the Bill is to be welcomed, because it will now make it an offence to “direct or shine” a laser beam that dazzles or distracts a driver, pilot or otherwise when a vehicle is “moving” or “ready to move”.

My only criticism is that this does not go far enough. Someone cannot endanger hundreds of lives on an aircraft, and potentially hundreds more on the ground, by accident. There are no mitigating circumstances. It is not a misunderstanding; this crime is premeditated, and perpetrators should be treated like the criminals they are. We know it will be difficult to catch someone in the act of endangering a vehicle, but in the event that we do and they are found guilty they will now face a maximum jail sentence of five years, an unlimited fine or both. That is to be welcomed. It is a step in the right direction. I do not think it goes far enough, but I am otherwise content with this Bill.

3.22 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith). I can offer him the name of an extremely competent hypnotherapist who will help him through his flight problems, if he would like. With a special word, she will keep her fee to about half the normal one.

I support the Bill for all the positive reasons that everyone has given, but I have an additional personal reason for doing so. About two summers back, I was undertaking a parliamentary police course with the Met police. Late on one pleasant summer evening, I was a passenger in a Met police helicopter flying over Kingston, close to the Heathrow flight path. All of a sudden, the pilot shouted, “Duck, laser beam!” He swung the helicopter round through 90° so that the light could not come into the cabin, but before that had happened, unfortunately, the light had hit my left eye. The point has been made that this dazzles, but it does more than that—it damaged my eye.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) pointed out, these police helicopters have fantastic cameras. The film is put up on to a screen which, in effect, has the “A-Z” on it. We hovered around and guided two police cars, which were carrying four police officers. Two of them went in the front door of this individual’s property and two went over the fence at the back. They collected the gentleman with his laser beam—I am exaggerating when I call him a “gentleman”. It was just like the movies.

As this individual was collected by the police, another voice broke in over the air traffic radio. It was the voice of a pilot on an incoming Virgin jumbo jet, which presumably had hundreds of passengers on board. He said, “I have broken in to say thank you. It happens to us as we come into Heathrow time after time after time, and they don’t get caught.”

The following day, I attended a clinic at the Moorfields Eye Hospital, where I was informed that my eye had been damaged, but that it would heal. As I have said, these lasers do not just dazzle; they do damage to the eyes. Wherever someone is, if they are hit by one of these lights, they get their eye damaged.

I found it astonishing that anyone would be stupid enough to deliberately risk damaging another person’s eye, let alone that of a pilot in a plane or helicopter

flying over a tightly built-up area such as Kingston. Additionally, I am amazed to find that police helicopters are targeted. I would have thought that people would have to be remarkably stupid to do that, particularly knowing that these cameras are there; the word “Police” is written right along the helicopter and this person must have seen it. So stupidity reigned, and that resulted in this person being collected.

Beyond that is a point that has been made several times: I am staggered that anybody would want to damage the eyesight of a pilot of a passenger plane running into Heathrow, as this Virgin plane was. As I said, there will have been hundreds of people on that plane, and if that idiot had targeted the pilots, he could have damaged the landing of that aircraft, with the potential loss of hundreds of lives.

I was not told the name of the individual, because I would have liked to have paid him a visit. On seeing the film—my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby mentioned this—he pleaded guilty, but the fine was not effective enough. The Bill will help to address that, so I have my own special reason for supporting it. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Will there be more speeches with such impact as the one we have just heard?

3.26 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I join colleagues in congratulating hon. Members from both sides of the House who have made knowledgeable contributions in this interesting debate. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) for his deeply personal, moving and thoughtful contribution.

As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State alluded to earlier, Labour supports this uncontroversial Bill. We agree that the growing misuse of lasers is a problem that needs to be dealt with swiftly. Owing to the sheer number of laser attacks on aircraft and other vehicles in recent years, along with the growing power of laser pointers, we support legislative steps to make it a strict liability offence to shine a laser into the eyes of pilots and drivers when in control of vehicles. It is important to place on record the fact that although attacks on aircraft are by far the most common form of laser attack, incidents on railways and on shipping vessels have been reported.

I would also reaffirm our thanks to Labour colleagues in the other place who worked hard on this Bill by tightening up its language and definitions, as well as by gaining clarifications and important concessions from Ministers. There was a heated debate among Members of the other place about whether horse-drawn carriages and submarines should have been covered by the Bill—we thank them for that. Some of our learned Labour colleagues in the other place were more than qualified to speak about this topic, as one is a former airline pilot and another the president of the British Airline Pilots Association. I pay particular tribute to them for their work on this issue, and we thank the Government for the technical amendments that they tabled in response to the concessions that we won.

I reiterate the point that our colleagues in the other place made about enforcement. We have over 21,000 fewer police officers compared with in 2010. We will

[Matt Rodda]

raise further questions in Committee about whether the law will be enforced effectively by what I must say are already stretched police forces.

We support the Bill because of the concessions won by Labour peers in the House of Lords. We welcome steps to combat the growing problem of laser misuse and to protect the safety of pilots, drivers and passengers. We look forward to our deliberations in Committee.

3.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this debate. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out, the Bill is an aspect of the Government's important role of improving safety throughout the transport network. The Bill may be short, but I am sure we all agree that it is important.

Let me address the points raised by Members. First, I recognise all the work to prepare the Bill and get it to this stage that was undertaken under my right hon. Friend and mentor the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) when he was a Minister in the Department. He made a valid point about police stop-and-search powers. It is worth noting that the police already have the power to stop and search for laser pointers if they have reasonable grounds to suspect that the pointer is intended to be used to cause injury, because the pointer will meet the definition of an offensive weapon in such circumstances. That covers the more serious instances of laser pointer misuse.

The Government are clear that, when used correctly, the power of stop-and-search is vital in the fight against crime. However, when it is misused, stop-and-search can be counterproductive. The Home Office is conducting a review on achieving greater transparency, community involvement and police accountability in the use of stop-and-search. While that work takes place, it would not be appropriate to consult on extending the power of stop-and-search to cover lasers.

Mr John Hayes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her generous remarks. I take her point, and I of course understand why she made it, but perhaps she might make gentle overtures to the Home Office such that it might take this matter into account as part of that wider consideration of stop-and-search. It would be right to do that, given the broad agreement among those in the Chamber during this short debate.

Ms Ghani: There is no way that I could stand at the Dispatch Box and contradict my right hon. Friend, given that he spent many months preparing the Bill. No doubt his representations will be noted by the Home Office, and I will raise them with colleagues there personally.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) for his contribution. I was a little nervous when I heard about his piloting skills; I am glad to see him safe and sound in the Chamber. He made valid points about the danger to pilots, air traffic controllers and taxiing aircrafts. He also recognised the work done by the CAA, which provides extra support and guidance for pilots in respect of eye health when they are subject to such attacks.

On the points made by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has responded following its call for evidence on the market for laser pointers. The Government have committed to take action to improve the frequency and resourcing of enforcement activities at ports and borders, with the aim of improving the safety of the market for laser pointers and increasing enforcement activities against the import of dangerous high-powered laser pointers. We have also committed to provide additional support for enforcement activities around the import of high-powered laser pointers. A grant of around £100,000 is available to local authorities so that they can increase checks and tests.

Alan Brown: I appreciate that the Minister has tried to give us a bit more clarity, but the key questions are about the timescales for the provision of additional resources, and about what additional resources will be provided at which ports throughout the United Kingdom.

Ms Ghani: The additional resources will be provided not only by my Department, in the form of the £100,000 for local authorities, but by BEIS and border control agencies. Getting the Bill through Parliament is one step towards implementing the restrictions and deterring people from the dangerous use of laser pens. That in itself will raise awareness of the crime and how dangerous it is to point laser pens at different types of transport.

I now move on to the contribution made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham, who has spent many years raising this issue, including through a private Member's Bill. He has met many Ministers across many Departments and is a true champion of his constituency. He raised the valid point of how we collect accurate data about the number of offences that are committed across the many modes of transport. He is right to note that the Crown Prosecution Service does not keep full records of laser-related offences, and I will take that point up with my colleagues at the Ministry of Justice. I hope that he will be patient while yet another Minister tries to address one of his passionate interests by getting a Bill through Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith) has huge experience of this matter, which he was able to convey to Members today. He is a strong champion not only for his constituency, but for pilots across this country. He raised valid points about the safety of pilots and on the maximum sentence of five years. Five years represents the maximum prison term and that would be imposed only in the most serious cases. With such offences, it is important that we have an effective deterrent, and the penalty is in line with those for similar existing offences, such as endangering an aircraft, which also carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison under the Air Navigation Order 2016.

The safety and security of the travelling public will always be a priority for the Government. Given that more than 1,000 attacks on aircraft are reported each year, in addition to those on other modes of transport, we have a duty to act. The new offences will act as a deterrent to prevent these dangerous incidents from

happening in the first place, but if they do occur, our proposals will help the police to bring offenders to justice.

We have had a good debate, and I am pleased that there is cross-party support for the Bill. Again, I acknowledge the work undertaken by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings. I acknowledge, too, all the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby did as Aviation Minister. Of course, I also recognise the work of my noble Friend Baroness Sugg in successfully steering the Bill through the other place and of the UK laser working group. I am grateful to everybody who has been involved in the debate, and I hope that I have dealt with the points that have been raised. I commend the Bill to the House and look forward to discussing it further at its later stages.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

LASER MISUSE (VEHICLES) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

2. Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

3. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

Programming committee

4. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to other proceedings up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

5. Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Paul Maynard.*)

Question agreed to.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The individual referred to as Albert Thompson at today's Prime Minister's questions is my constituent. I should say that that is not his actual name, because he does not want his real name to be used publicly. In the earlier exchanges, the Prime Minister said that Mr Thompson will be receiving the NHS treatment he needs. That is incorrect. He needs radiotherapy treatment, but he has not received his treatment. If any plans have been made for him to get this treatment, he certainly has not been informed of them. That is a fact and to say otherwise is wrong. He is making a fresh application for indefinite leave to remain. The Prime Minister needs to commit to that application being processed immediately and, at the very least, to him getting indefinite leave to remain so that he can get this treatment, which the Royal Marsden Hospital is not prepared to give him unless he can pay up front or prove his right to residency.

I am sure that the Prime Minister will not want to have misled the House and will want to come here to correct the record. There have also been attempts to lay part of the blame for this particular situation at the door of previous Home Secretaries and the current Home Secretary, but much of this flows from the decisions made by the Prime Minister during her time as Home Secretary. I will be grateful if you, Madam Deputy Speaker, can advise on how I can pursue this with the Prime Minister.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that, while I understand that he wishes to put these facts on the record and that, if the record requires to be corrected, he wishes to draw that fact to the attention of the Treasury Bench, this is not a point of order for me. What Ministers, or indeed any other Member of this House, say in the Chamber is a matter for the Minister or the Member. Having said that, if the facts to which the Prime Minister alluded today turn out not to be correct, I am quite sure that steps will be taken to correct them. The hon. Gentleman asks for my advice about how he might draw this matter to the attention of the appropriate Ministers; he has done so. Although I can do nothing about it, he has achieved his aim.

Industrial Strategy

3.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Industrial Strategy.

It is a great pleasure to open this debate. We are at one of the most important, exciting and challenging times in the history of global enterprise. All around the world, new technologies are transforming the way in which we live our lives as citizens, how we work and the products and services that we consume and supply. Whether it is in artificial intelligence, the digitisation of manufacturing, the clean energy revolution or breakthroughs in medicine, such is the scale of change that it has been described as the fourth industrial revolution. Britain is extraordinarily well placed to lead and benefit from this industrial revolution, just as we did in the first industrial revolution.

We are an open and enterprising economy, built on invention, innovation and competition. We are one of the world's scientific powerhouses, producing more Nobel prize winners each year than any other country apart from America. We are synonymous with creativity, from literature to video games. People know that the UK is a hotbed of new ideas. In an uncertain world, we have a deserved reputation for being a dependable and confident place in which to do business, with high standards, respected institutions and the reliable rule of law. As this week's Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting shows, we are—and always will be—proudly international. We are a crossing point for the world because of our geographic position, the importance of the English language, our global friendships and our vibrant culture.

Ten years on from the financial crisis, we have built a stronger economy than many people thought possible at the time. Unemployment is at its lowest rate for 43 years and there are more people in work than ever before. Our public finances have been transformed by rigorously reducing the yawning deficit that was inherited. We have world-beating industries—from financial services to the life sciences, and from the creative industries to advanced manufacturing.

As we look to the future, it is one in which Britain's strengths are in increasing demand all around the world. The world is avid for our products, services, skills and know-how. To benefit from the opportunities before us, we need to prepare to seize them. We need to ensure that we join all the forces of our people and our economy to reinforce them and extend our strengths into the future, as well as capitalising on the new opportunities that have presented themselves. That is why I stood before this House at the end of November to launch our industrial strategy White Paper.

Deliberately, the exercise of producing the White Paper was a collaborative one. It was the biggest such consultation ever undertaken by my Department and its predecessors, drawing input from more than 2,000 organisations the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. I was particularly pleased that all the devolved Administrations contributed enthusiastically to the consultation. Employers, universities, research institutions, local government leaders and trade unions all contributed to the consultation that resulted in the White Paper, and

there was a deliberate reason for this. It seems to me that if the nation is to have an industrial strategy, it has to be for the long term; we must orient our economy and society to the long term. The best way to ensure that policies and institutions endure is to take people with us, and to ensure that the advice and wisdom of all parts of the United Kingdom and all parts of the economy are taken and distilled into something of which all can feel a part.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, Teesside is a powerhouse for industry, but in my constituency unemployment is still double the national average, and across the north-east of England it is considerably higher than the national average. Does he not agree that still more needs to be done to ensure that we balance industrial strategy in favour of those areas where there is high unemployment, and a lack of skills as well?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman knows Teesside very well. One of the things he would welcome is that in recent years the long-standing disparity, going back decades, between constituencies like his and others in the country has narrowed. There is a real sense of progress and achievement on Teesside that I experience every time I go up there; I was up there a couple of weeks ago. However, he is absolutely right that we need to continue that progress. We need to reflect on the fact that, as I said, many of the industries, skills and attributes that are in demand across the world now—marine engineering, for example—are abundant in areas like Teesside. We must capitalise on that, and we have a massive opportunity to do so. The industrial strategy, as he knows—our friends and colleagues on Teesside contributed very fully to it—has, for the first time in an industrial strategy, a real, very clear attachment to the importance of recognising the contributions of different places. This came out very strongly through the consultation, so he is absolutely right.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): We have just seen a hostile takeover of GKN. Some of my constituents work at a GKN plant in Luton. Does this not look like a return to the kind of cowboy capitalism we have seen in the past, where hostile takeovers lead to asset-stripping that will make short-term profit, rather than being about the long-term interests of the economy and our manufacturing sector?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman knows that I have a quasi-judicial role to exercise in response to certain takeovers, so I cannot comment on that particular case. I would say, however, that in technologies such as automotive and aerospace, there is a high degree of interest and, indeed, optimism about the future capabilities of companies right across those sectors and their supply chains. I mentioned marine engineering; aerospace and automotive are also examples of areas of British strength. The industrial strategy commits to build on that. My intention in implementing the industrial strategy is that our current strengths will be extended.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Earlier, the Secretary of State used the term, “this nation”. Does he accept that he has responsibility for growth in the economies of all the nations of the UK?

Greg Clark: I do indeed. In using that expression, as I think was evident from the context, I was praising the contribution that has been made from all parts of the United Kingdom. I am looking forward to being in Edinburgh tomorrow to give evidence on the industrial strategy to the Scottish Parliament. The work that we have done with the Government in Scotland has been very important. We had a very effective consultation session in Edinburgh. Many colleagues in Scotland contributed to it, and they see the results of it there.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about an industrial strategy, which, in general terms, we welcome, but running alongside that we need to have an investment strategy, particularly in new technological developments and in energy areas such as electric cars. Will he say something about an investment strategy as well, because the regulator plays a big part in this?

Greg Clark: I am coming on to talk about that, but I will say now that one of the major breakthroughs in the industrial strategy is to recognise the utmost importance of investment in research and development, not only on the part of the private sector but on the public sector side as well. All around the world, advanced nations are investing in the future through R&D, and we have in the industrial strategy the biggest increase in research and development that we have ever seen in this country. It is a matter of pride that we were able to achieve that.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I very much welcome the fact that the Government are committed to the industrial strategy. When I was a Minister in the Secretary of State's Department some years ago, we rebooted and renewed the belief in an industrial strategy in the wake of the financial crisis. I am glad that it has survived and that there has been a lot of continuity through the years of the coalition Government to his tenure. This is a welcome move away from the laissez-faire approach that we had in the 1980s, but it will only work if it is bought into by others beyond his Department. Given that many other countries are trying to do similar things, is he confident that he has the commitment right across the Government and the scale of resources and buy-in necessary from the Treasury and others to make this a success?

Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. First, in terms of what was achieved before, he is right to recognise that we are building on what have been successes. Successful arrangements that have been put in place in the process industries, for example, are recognised and built on in the strategy. It is very important that we have a long-term approach. He is absolutely right; this is not my Department's industrial strategy, my industrial strategy or even the Government's industrial strategy. The ambition for this strategy is to unite all the nations of the United Kingdom and the UK Government certainly, but also the leaders of our cities, towns, counties and universities. The approach we have taken in developing the strategy is precisely for that purpose.

I have a set of responsibilities which the right hon. Gentleman will know, from his tenure in my Department, are limited to those allocated to the Business Department. However, when it comes to skills or investment in

transport infrastructure, for example, it is vital that all join together. One of the strategy's purposes is that we can clearly brigade in a way that reinforces the different contributions.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Greg Clark: I will, then I will make progress.

Wayne David: On that point, one crucial aspect of our industrial base is the defence sector, yet one of the surprising things about the Government's industrial strategy is that the defence sector is hardly mentioned, if at all.

Greg Clark: I would not read too much into that. The defence industrial strategy is a very important part of our overall strategy. There are many references to industries—I mentioned aerospace—in which the innovation that comes from defence work can have important spillovers for the wider economy. We recognise that across the world that tends to be the case. The defence sector is very important to the strategy, and when some of the sector deals that I will come on to discuss are agreed, the hon. Gentleman will see that in abundance.

Drawing on input across the United Kingdom, we have an approach that is the distilled wisdom of many different contributors. It is a vision to help businesses raise their productivity performance, which is essential if we are to increase the country's earning power. If we want to pay ourselves better as a nation and a society, we need to earn the way to do that by creating better-paid jobs and putting our country at the forefront of the industries of the future.

Let me introduce the four grand challenges that we have set out. I mentioned that we are uniquely well placed in this country, having leadership in some of the areas of the future, but we should not take that leadership for granted. We should have a deliberate plan and programme to reinforce that success. The four areas we have set out in the strategy, on advice, are artificial intelligence and the data-driven economy; clean growth; the future of mobility; and meeting the needs of an ageing society. Those challenges have been identified on the advice of our leading scientists and technologists, and they will be supported by investment from the new industrial strategy challenge fund and matched by commercial investment.

Let us take each of those briefly. We know that, whether in the Alan Turing Institute or in our companies throughout the UK, we have some of the most innovative thinkers and practitioners in AI and the use of data. We already have that reputation, but we need to keep at the forefront of those developments. A big part of the strategy is to recognise that, historically, as all Members know, we have been better at the "R" of R&D than the "D". We have had brilliant ideas, but sometimes we have let them slip through our fingers and seen them implemented in industrial processes and investments in manufacturing in other countries. A big part of the challenge is therefore not just discovery but applying those discoveries in UK industry.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): When travelling overseas on parliamentary business and visiting universities, I have noticed, particularly in America, that people are

[James Heappey]

much more entrepreneurial in their research projects and mapping out a route to a market. What might the Department do to encourage that sort of entrepreneurial spirit in our universities?

Greg Clark: We are getting better at it. Most colleagues will have experience of their local universities and others, and most research universities have active programmes to spin out discoveries and reap the benefits. Again, through the industrial strategy challenge fund, funding is available on a match basis to universities to pursue that implementation of good ideas. My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Let us take the future of mobility. The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and I have had many conversations about this country's reputation not only for the efficient manufacture of vehicles—that is a proud record—but for innovation, whether in the west midlands or the world-beating cluster of Formula 1 businesses around Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire. The world comes to the UK for the next generation of technologies. Forty-year veterans of the automotive industry say that this is the most exciting time in their career, when not only the powertrain but the way in which vehicles navigate is undergoing a revolution. Around the world, there is increasing demand for that set of technologies and we have a strong capability in them. Again, setting a grand challenge is crucial.

We have set the Faraday challenge to be a world leader in the development and application of new battery technology. It is already attracting great interest around the world, and the hon. Member for Coventry South will know that the national battery manufacturing development facility will be located in Warwickshire at the heart of our cluster there.

On the ageing society, whether in Glasgow and Edinburgh or Cambridge, we have some of the best researchers in the world looking at medical breakthroughs that will be in increasing demand around the world. I make it clear that now and long into the future, we will invest in the facilities and the people to make us the place to come to research new innovations. As Members from Scotland will know, the Glasgow city deal had a big medical component to build on our success there.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Clearly, medical innovation and continued investment are welcome, but when dealing with an ageing population and workforce, we need not just innovation but immigration. We need immigration in the healthcare sector to support an ageing population. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Government should review their immigration policy, especially tier 2 visas, which are putting a block on experienced healthcare workers coming to the UK?

Greg Clark: As the hon. Gentleman knows—the industrial strategy is clear about it—we benefit from the contribution of workers, scientists and engineers from all over the world. There is no successful future for an economy that does not engage with the world. That means that we should be open to talent from around the world. We need to make sure, as every responsible nation does, that we have an orderly system for managing immigration from around the world. That

is what we are achieving and what we will continue to achieve. It is very clear, on every page of the strategy, that this is a vision for an international Britain, rather than one that is moving towards a kind of national self-sufficiency.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and for the commitment he is making to ensuring that world-class talent from across the world can continue to come to support science in Britain. When the president of the Royal Society came to speak to the Science and Technology Committee, he pointed out that world-class scientists need to be mobile, anthropologists need to work abroad and those working for the British Antarctic Survey need to go to Antarctica. Will he make sure that the visa system is able to provide that mobility?

Greg Clark: That is very important. One of the commitments in the industrial strategy is to increase the number of visas and studentships for international researchers coming to work in the UK. Nobel prizes were mentioned earlier. I had the privilege, when I was Science Minister, to go the Nobel prize ceremony. What is notable is not just that a lot of Brits receive these awards, but that most Nobel prizes in the sciences are given to teams of researchers and that those teams are usually international. That embodies the fact that the best ideas come from the connections that are made between researchers from different cultures and different countries.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State mentions the critical need to attract high-quality education graduates from across the world to British universities. Does he also recognise that that is a critical part of growing our population? In Scotland, we had a declining population. The Labour Administration under Jack McConnell introduced a post-study work visa scheme, which reversed Scotland's historic population decline. That is why today we have a great legacy of an expanding population in Scotland that is adding value to our economy.

Greg Clark: The overall population of the UK is growing, as the hon. Gentleman knows. It is important that our immigration system is set in a sensible way that recognises the needs of the economy and the needs of our society, and that is the approach being taken.

I talked about grand challenges. Let me turn to another important aspect of the industrial strategy, which is, candidly, to address areas of historic relative weakness in the UK economy. I talked about our strengths, but it is well known to every Member of this House that for many years now our productivity performance has not been as good as that of some of our competitors, and since the financial crisis it has been slower to recover. In recent quarters we have seen an acceleration of productivity growth, but I think everyone would recognise that it is the responsibility of this House and those of us in government to act on the foundations of productivity, so that we can maximise the productive capacity of the economy. A big part of the consultation was to consider what we can do to drive up our productivity performance.

There are five areas in which clear commitments and progress are required across the whole economy—indeed, across society, to go back to the comments made by the

right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden). This is not simply, if at all, in the gift of the Business Department. It requires a whole-country commitment to investing in the foundations of productivity. We have set out our plans and ideas on research and development, as I mentioned earlier. As new technologies are developed, the skills required by the workforce to make use of them clearly need to change as well. It is no good doing one if we do not do the other, so the skills element of the strategy is very important. It is important to recognise the different needs of different places, as I mentioned in response to an intervention from the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham).

We want to make sure that our business environment is not only competitive and open, but recognises the need to ensure that when companies start up—we have a great record of start-ups—they can attract the funding that they require to grow into medium and larger businesses. We want to make sure that the infrastructure on which our whole economy depends is competitive with the best in the world. Through the industrial strategy, we set out action across all five of those contributors to productivity.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The Secretary of State has not mentioned the principal foundation of productivity: the workers of Great Britain. Obviously, investment in those workers is absolutely key to making sure that they see that their own investment in their work and productivity will lead to substantive benefits for them and their families. The response to the joint inquiry by the Work and Pensions and Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committees into the Taylor review on modern employment practices kicks a lot of the action into the long grass and into consultation. Will the Minister please admit today that workers are the foundation of productivity and that they need the Government to commit to solid action?

Greg Clark: It is not a question of admitting to it—I want to boast of it. When I talk about our strengths and talents, those are the strengths of the people of the United Kingdom as workers, researchers and leaders of local economies. The prosperity of our economy is founded on our workforce. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to emphasise the importance of investment in people. I have mentioned investment in research and development, but it is important for her to reflect that much of that is about investment in people, making sure that we have research funding and opportunities for researchers so that we have brilliant individuals as well as physical infrastructure.

When it comes to investment in skills and the workforce generally, the hon. Lady is absolutely right. I have mentioned the importance of skills training. One thing that we and Members from across the UK know is that there are shortages in many parts of the country, particularly in engineering and technology skills. That is before we have the full benefit of the opportunities set out in the industrial strategy, which highlights and commits us to a long-term programme of upgrading not just investment—although that is important—but the prestige attached to technical qualifications in this country, and to emphasising the importance of that. There is, for example, nearly half a billion pounds of investment in teaching maths, digital and technical education.

I am pleased that the hon. Lady mentioned the Matthew Taylor review, because it is exactly the right kind of strategic approach that we should take. We know that new technology is changing the world of work and that it poses challenges to established ways of working. Rather than simply ignoring that and not addressing those changes, in commissioning Matthew Taylor to review the emerging economy we equipped ourselves with some very important reforms that Taylor himself advised we should consult carefully on. That consultation came from a review commissioned by the Government, who absolutely have the intention to deliver on its recommendations. The consultation is the way to proceed with legislation and regulation.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Secretary of State refers to the prestige of an industrial qualification as a device to attract the most capable people into industry and manufacturing. Does he agree that it is also important for manufacturing to show in a more open way exactly what the manufacturing environment is like now? Far too many people see manufacturing in the style of dirty old factories such as those that existed a generation ago. The manufacturing landscape has changed, but I do not think that we have managed to get that message across to our young people to encourage the brightest and the best to make it a career destination.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is sometimes not known and cannot be seen what modern manufacturing is about. I had the great privilege and pleasure of visiting the Big Bang Fair at the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham a few weeks ago, which does precisely what he advises. The excitement among the young people there, seeing the possibilities available, was palpable. It does a great job.

I know that you are rightly interested in other Members being able to contribute, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will make some progress and give colleagues the chance to speak. Along with the measures in the Taylor review, it is very important, when new technologies require different skills from the existing workforce, that we back industry in providing the training that is needed. In that regard, the national retraining scheme being developed in conjunction with employers and trade unions, focusing initially on construction and digital skills, is a very important commitment. It is also vital that we upgrade our infrastructure, whether physical infrastructure or the broadband and mobile connections on which many new businesses depend, and again important commitments have been made in that regard.

When it comes to places, the leadership being given to many of our great cities by elected Mayors, not least those elected last year, must be combined with the ability, powers and resources necessary for them to make a difference to their areas. One of our commitments was a fund to enable local leaders better to connect not just city centres but the networks and clusters of smaller towns around our cities. An early example was the decision by Andy Street, Mayor of the West Midlands, to use the investment available through the industrial strategy to fund a metro extension to Brierley Hill and Wednesbury, which connects two important parts of the west midlands to Birmingham and the wider area.

On the business environment, we know that there is a problem of composition. We have some highly productive, highly performing businesses as well as what the Bank

[Greg Clark]

of England has identified as a long tail of less productive businesses, and transmitting the lessons from the best to the others is an important part of the work that we need to do.

I will conclude by saying a word about the importance of particular sectors. We have talked about the north-east and Teesside, the west midlands and other parts of the country. We know that the clusters of excellence in those areas can be very important not only in driving productivity but in attracting new investment and becoming the location of new businesses.

Alex Cunningham: One of those clusters is, of course, the chemical industry. People in that industry are extremely anxious about the possibility that the EU regulation concerning the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals might go when we leave the EU. Will the Secretary of State update the House on where we are with negotiations on those regulations to ensure a common working platform for chemicals after we leave the EU?

Greg Clark: I would incur your displeasure, Madam Deputy Speaker, if I went into the European negotiations. Suffice it to say that if the hon. Gentleman reads the Prime Minister's Mansion House speech, he will see a reference to chemicals. We take the advice of the Chemical Industries Association, which I meet regularly, into those negotiations so that we can continue to trade successfully in that very important sector.

I want to say a word about sector deals. As the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East mentioned, we know of the success of long-standing arrangements whereby major manufacturers, supply chains and the Government can work together—for example, in the automotive sector and the aerospace sector. These important institutions have taken a lead and boosted jobs and prosperity. In the industrial strategy consultation, therefore, we asked whether we should offer and engage in more sector deals with sectors that have not benefited from those arrangements. We asked business whether that proposal had merit, and the answer was an emphatic yes. These deals are about the Government working with sectors, but also about the sectors working with each other, in exactly the way that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned.

We have made significant progress. In December, I launched the life sciences sector deal with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. This deal for the long term is already attracting immediate investment, including from MSD, which is supporting nearly 1,000 jobs in the UK.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The Secretary of State is talking about the long term, which is very important. For a company such as Airbus, the relationship with its suppliers, which is not a short-term relationship but a long-term one, is also very important. It is because such a relationship is so important that there are fears about how long Melrose will actually invest in GKN and keep hold of that company.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the importance of long-term relationships. I have said that I cannot make an appraisal of that particular

bid, since I have a decision to make, but it is on the record that I requested and obtained commitments from the bidder to investment in research and development, and indeed to the continued ownership of that aerospace business. I hope he will therefore recognise that I regard commitments to the long term as important.

I have mentioned the life sciences sector deal. We launched the automotive sector deal in January, and I launched the creative industries sector deal with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport just last month. We have in the pipeline a number of other sectors where great progress has been made, and we expect to make more announcements soon.

I hope it is evident that in the industrial strategy—whether looking to the future, harnessing our resources to make sure that we capitalise on our existing strengths, or looking objectively and candidly at areas in which we need to do better and in which we need to invest for the foundations of future productivity—the approach we have taken is to set out a strategy for the long term to which all parts of the United Kingdom can contribute.

We are not the only country in the world to recognise that a technological revolution is taking place. Wherever I travel I find similar concerns, and similar appraisals of the future are being undertaken by other countries. Our industrial strategy has already, in the few months since it was published, attracted widespread attention and respect around the world. We have already translated it into several languages because of demand, so any colleagues travelling around the world who want copies of it can approach my office for a translation in most languages, and we will have other translations made according to demand.

Our industrial strategy is a calling card for the future of the United Kingdom economy, and I hope Members on both sides of the House recognise that in pulling together our strengths and opportunities through it, we have a chance to tell the world, as well as our fellow countrymen and women, that this country has a great future ahead of it, just as we have had a very successful past. I commend the motion to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the spokesman for the Opposition, let me say that it will be obvious that a great many Members—I have indications from more than 20 people—wish to speak this afternoon, and there is limited time. I therefore give a warning now, so that colleagues who wish to speak can tailor their notes accordingly, that there will be a time limit of six minutes to start with, but that is likely to be reduced later. That provides plenty of warning, but the time limit does not of course apply to Rebecca Long Bailey.

4.19 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): According to the Government's own declaration, the industrial strategy sets out their plan to create an economy that will boost productivity and earning power throughout the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State has just presented a very rosy picture of his Department's industrial strategy, but I am afraid those spectacles he is wearing may be a little bit rose-tinted.

The key questions that must be asked today are whether the strategy is working and whether it addresses the huge problems that our economy is facing. The first of those problems is productivity. I agree with the Secretary of State's comments about investing in the foundations of productivity, but we have just seen the productivity figures for 2017, and they are not good. Two negative quarters were followed by two positive quarters of growth. The two quarters of growth were caused by GDP growth slowing, but hours worked slowing even further. In other words, productivity has increased through the worst possible means. Even incorporating the 2017 figures, the productivity growth that has taken place over the 10 years since the crash has been the worst since 1820, just after the Napoleonic wars.

The second problem is GDP stagnation. For the 60 years preceding the financial crash, rising GDP meant broadly rising living standards. When GDP rose, unemployment came down and wages went up. However, over the course of 2017, UK GDP growth was weaker than GDP growth in any other G7 nation, standing at 1.4% compared to a G7 average of 2.4%. The figures were 2.9% in Germany and 2.5% in France. The situation is not forecast to improve: yesterday the International Monetary Fund forecast that we would be the slowest in the G7 bar Italy over the next two years, and the OECD predicts that we will grow more slowly than France, Germany and the United States in both 2018 and 2019. Worse still, among major advanced economies since the crash, Britain is the only one to have grown slightly while real wages have fallen.

The third problem is wage stagnation. In real terms, average weekly earnings are lower now than they were in 2007, 10 years ago. Working people, particularly those on low to middle incomes, have suffered the worst decade for a generation in terms of living standards. That is unprecedented since at least the end of the second world war. The quality of work is also an issue, as we have heard from some of my hon. Friends. The Secretary of State lauded employment figures in his opening remarks, but he must acknowledge that insecure employment is rife. According to the TUC, there are 3.2 million people in insecure work—about one in 10—and the number has risen sharply over the last half-decade, by 27%.

The Government tried to paper over those bleak realities with rhetoric in their recent response to the Taylor review, but I am not as optimistic or as excited as the Secretary of State was when he responded to comments earlier. Launching four consultations, merely considering proposals, failing really to act on the review's recommendations, and tweaking the law here and there is simply not good enough.

The fourth problem is uncertainty. Britain is facing an uncertain future—we are about to leave the European Union, and businesses are craving a deal that will put the economy and jobs first, with as much access to Europe as possible—but Europe aside, parts of our economic framework do not encourage certainty. Our takeover regime leaves many companies deeply uncertain about their future and prey to predatory and hostile takeovers. We have already heard about GKN today. Under our takeover laws, that fantastic manufacturing company was bought up by Melrose. It was clear that our takeover regime needed more teeth and more clarity,

but I must add that even in that case the Government had grounds to intervene on matters of defence and still failed to act. As the *Financial Times* suggested recently, the failure to equip our takeover regime adequately may be partly why a great company such as Unilever decided to make its legal home the Netherlands. How many other companies will follow?

The fifth and final problem is inequality. Sadly, the UK is one of the most unequal countries in Europe in terms of household income. As the Resolution Foundation recently revealed, inequality is projected to increase after 2016-17. On some measures, it is projected to rise to record highs by 2023. Furthermore, there are clear inequalities between our regions and nations. The Institute for Public Policy Research Commission on Economic Justice has found that Britain is the most regionally imbalanced country in Europe.

All these problems are not just abstract, general issues; they have recently manifested themselves in concrete examples—a barometer of the health and efficacy of the Government's industrial strategy going forward. We started this year with the insolvency of Carillion, but that is not an isolated example. Our retail sector shows signs of strain: Toys R Us has collapsed; Maplin has gone into administration; New Look is fighting to avoid it; and Carpetright is planning a company voluntary arrangement. Workers have also felt the pain of a stalling economy: in the last week alone, literally thousands of workers have been threatened with job losses at Jaguar Land Rover and Shop Direct, yet we have received no statement whatsoever from the Government on what they are doing to protect those jobs, so perhaps the Minister will outline in his summing-up speech the action he is taking.

Ruth George: I met many businesses in my constituency last week. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that several of them are already having to move trade to EU countries because they are worried about the cost of a visa system when they cannot guarantee that they will hang on to the staff they pay for, the ending of preferential tariffs at the EU rate—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady is not making a speech; she is also taking away from the time for other Members.

Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend made some pertinent points and I will talk about skills shortly, and the extreme worry that many of our business leaders across the country have voiced about both Brexit and the quality and adequacy of the supply we have currently in the UK.

Returning to the problems that are a barometer of the issues in our economy, will the Minister update us in his summing up on the Government's rabbit-in-the-headlights approach to the risks currently faced by our steel industry as a result of recent discussions and the global crisis of overcapacity and dumping? This Government have been in power for eight years—the best part of a decade—and they must own these problems if they are to make any progress; they must own the fact that they have not solved the five problems I outlined earlier, and that instead they have festered.

The Secretary of State and I are in clear agreement on the need for an effective industrial strategy. I applauded the Government for adopting to some extent Labour's

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

mission-orientated policy approach and the Secretary of State outlined the challenges again today, but I am afraid that this is where the consensus ends. As I set out late last year, the detail and investment proposed in the industrial strategy White Paper simply did not match the surrounding rhetoric and fell far short of what was needed truly to boost our economy. Indeed, a Government source was recently quoted as saying:

“It’s all perfectly worthy, who could oppose any of it? But there is no money, and even if there was, no one has a decent idea of what to do with it.”

So for the benefit of the House let us look briefly at a few key snippets again.

The Secretary of State touched on innovation. Raising total R&D investment to 2.4% of GDP by 2027 is certainly better than where we were, but the UK has been below the OECD average of 2.4% of GDP for years, and we are way behind world leaders who spend over 3% such as Japan, South Korea, Finland and Sweden. Why are we simply aiming for average? It must also be noted that the R&D investment of many of our regions and nations is also well below average. Over half of all research funding goes to the south-east, for example.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I just cannot contain my anger: settle for average? We have some of the best universities on the planet in this country and investment by this Government in some of the most world-leading, cutting-edge technology. I visited Birmingham university and saw its work on quantum computing; it is absolutely world-leading. We are not average at all, and it is so dismissive of this country to say we would settle for average; we are excellent.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman is not making a speech either, but I think the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) has got his point.

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Gentleman makes his point very passionately, but I do not think he has really listened to what I have been saying. We are certainly—[*Interruption.*] Please! If Government Members would listen rather than chunter, they might actually learn something.

We are far from average, as these comments from the Commission on Economic Justice illustrate quite articulately:

“We have vast ingenuity and creativity among our people, where enterprise and industry have deep roots going back to the Industrial Revolution. Many of the most important scientific discoveries in human history have taken place in Britain, advancing not only this country but also the entirety of humanity.”

We are far from average—I agree with the comments that the hon. Gentleman made in a, shall we say, quite haphazard and incoherent way—so why should we have to trail behind the world and settle for mediocrity from this Government in terms of investment in research and development?

Vicky Ford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I will make some progress, if I may, then the hon. Lady can make further interventions.

In relation to skills, we were promised about £500 million of investment. That is frankly pitiful and does not even begin to repair the damage done to the adult skills budget between 2010 and 2015, when over £1.15 billion was cut. With research by PWC finding that 77% of CEOs worry that skills shortages could impair their company’s growth, and with the CBI stating that 69% of businesses are not confident about filling their high-skilled jobs, the Government’s actions have done little to show that they are creating a workforce truly ready for our industrial renaissance.

On infrastructure investment, we were promised £31 billion of investment through the national productivity investment fund. Again, that is below the levels seen in other leading industrial nations. As TUC analysis shows, the sums promised will simply increase investment to just 2.9% of GDP, whereas the average spend on investment by the leading industrial nations in the OECD is 3.5%. It is also clear that the Government have made no attempt to halt the skewing of infrastructure spending towards London, which is due to get more transport spending over the next five years than the rest of England put together.

That brings me to local industrial policy. Labour has been clear on the need for a national industrial strategy, but we are also clear about the need to be regionally powerful and distinctive, with the resources to match, and to build on the already world-class universities and businesses in our regions and nations. Since last November, the Labour party has been convening roundtables in every region and nation of the UK to discuss what businesses in those regions need from an industrial strategy. Alarming, in one region I heard that the responsibility for formulating a local industrial strategy had simply landed on the desk of the local enterprise partnership’s chief executive, with no additional resources. Could the Minister confirm whether there is a team in his Department working on local industrial strategy or whether that is simply now the responsibility of LEPs? Last month, the *Local Government Chronicle* argued that the Government should put more resources into agreeing a local industrial strategy if they did not want to risk concentrating their efforts on improving the economy in just a handful of areas.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), I wonder whether the hon. Lady would like to visit the west midlands and meet the Conservative Mayor of that devolved authority, who has most certainly come together with a local industrial strategy. There are resources there, backed by this Government and their friends on these Benches, and that is making a real difference in our region. I would be happy to host the hon. Lady and enable her to speak to those successful businesses that are backing our Conservative Mayor.

Rebecca Long Bailey *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I just remind people that we have a lot of speakers in this debate. Short interventions, please.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, which are rather illuminating. I wonder whether she could share with the House how her

region managed to secure those additional resources, so that we could let our colleagues know about it. That simply does not seem to be the case right across Britain.

Now, there was also a clear failure in business support. The Government's proposals recognised that we need both public and private investment. Similarly, the Labour party has pledged to mobilise £250 billion of lending through a national investment bank and a network of regional development banks. However, the Government's proposals fall far short of that. I said in the House last year that sector deals, a £2.5 billion investment fund incubated in the British Business Bank and yet another review into encouraging SME growth were simply not good enough. There was a clear failure to recognise the impediments that many businesses face when attempting to access finance and, indeed, there was a failure to protect businesses more generally.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that we lost a lot of support after 2010 when Business Link was shut and the regional development agencies were closed down? Business support has gone backwards. We need to take it forwards, but we have lost eight years.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I completely agree. Unfortunately, what I see as I travel around Britain is a bit of a postcode lottery in business support, and the Government need to address that urgently.

As I said, the Government failed to recognise the impediments facing many businesses and to outline any more general protections. That could not have been displayed more clearly than in the Government's handling of the Carillion scandal, where key requests by business organisations to mandate 30-day payment to suppliers and instigate the use of project bank accounts were effectively ignored. The Government simply looked on as Carillion and other big players like it abused the businesses that they contracted with and passed on financial liability and risk down the supply chain. Labour pledged to mandate 30-day prompt payment and the use of project bank accounts for all Government projects, and I will be grateful if the Minister will do the same today when summing up.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): My hon. Friend rightly points to the failures around the collapse of Carillion, which was a disaster for the many thousands of people who worked for it. The other organisations that failed were the regulators, so does she agree that we need a root-and-branch think about how we regulate the private sector, particularly when organisations are delivering public services at vast cost to the public purse?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I completely agree again.

Another issue that has been brought to my attention relates to sector deals. I understand that sectors are ready with proposals for such deals, but there is no clear structure or process in place for them to follow. For example, the rail industry has had a proposal for a sector deal ready since October, and the plan would deliver transformation across rail over the next 20 years, including new approaches that will cut the cost of digital signalling, addressing capacity issues and reliability. Perhaps the Minister will explain to the House what the delay is. How many proposals for sector deals has he

received and how many have been agreed? Perhaps he will also commit to setting out in clear guidance, accessible to all businesses, how to go about pitching for a sector deal? Finally, will he update us on the implementation of the "Made Smarter" review? It was effectively ready to go, but I am sad to say that it received only a few cursory lines in the Government's industrial strategy White Paper.

In short, Mr Deputy Speaker, as I am sure you have gleaned from my comments, the Government's industrial strategy, as drafted, is inadequate. While they now recognise the importance of an industrial strategy—well done—they are not prepared to use the full policy levers at their disposal to achieve it.

James Heappey: Following the shadow Secretary of State's consultations with businesses around the country, will she name just one that agrees with Labour's plans for nationalisation?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I would not want to put on the record in public the names of any specific companies without their consent, but there has been resounding support for Labour's approach to the industrial strategy, because we are prepared to invest in our country's future and to provide the support that businesses deserve. I am afraid that I hear time and again from businesses that the Conservative party simply does not listen anymore.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Rebecca Long Bailey: I will make some progress as I am coming to the end of my comments.

One of the key responsibilities of any Government is to deliver the best quality of life to every single person in Britain, and this Government have failed to do that. Labour knows that key to that responsibility is the delivery of a truly prosperous, ambitious and locally focused industrial strategy. We see a fourth industrial revolution that, with bold and focused Government investment and support, presents an opportunity for Britain to harness the power of technological and scientific innovation to achieve higher productivity and high-paid, high-skilled jobs in an employment landscape that values and protects workers.

We also see the need for an economic model that deals with the big issues of our time and the need to build an economy around missions so that we not only lead the world economically in these areas but deliver real social and economic benefits to our people. We recognise that industrial strategy must be a true collaboration between business, the Government and society, not a wild west that picks winners and losers, that pits region against region and that leaves businesses and workers to fend for themselves in a dog-eat-dog economy in which only the largest and most powerful survive.

That is the economy that Labour Members are intent on building, but sadly, it is not the economy that the Government are building. Although I am fiercely adamant that industrial strategy should not be political, from what I have seen so far from this Government, until we get a Labour Government we will not see an industrial strategy.

4.40 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am grateful to be called in this important debate. I thought that I was coming here to speak about industrial strategy, but having listening to the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), I realise we are having just another general debate on the economy in which we hear the same old Labour rants, gloom-filled prophecies and denunciations of Government policy.

Industrial strategy is one of the most interesting areas of policy and government, so it is frankly disappointing to see the Labour party using it purely as a political football, with its spokesman giving a ranting speech that, in my many years in this House, I have heard far too often—it was very dispiriting. I am sorry to have to introduce my short speech in this way, but her speech was a real missed opportunity.

It is exciting that, for the first time in a long while, we actually have an industrial strategy. The House will remember that there was no such thing under the previous Labour Administration. There was no coherent, focused strategy between 1997 and 2010, and it was exciting when the Government made their announcement last year.

On the reach of the industrial strategy, it is right to start with research and development, which is central to our forward progress. It was remarkable that the Lady opposite did not once use the phrase “research and development”, as far as I remember, although I will check *Hansard* tomorrow. It is surprising in such a debate that we did not hear anything about research and development from the Opposition.

Research and development is clearly a big part of the Government’s strategy, and there is a £4.7 billion fund for such investment. We are also trying to create a more favourable environment. From where I stand, corporation tax cuts, about which we have been very consistent over the past eight years, have been an important lever—the Lady opposite talked about levers.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Forgive me. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has picked me up on that.

It is right that we look at these measures in the round. Reductions in corporation tax from 28% towards 18% have been of huge benefit in trying to create a culture of entrepreneurship and in trying to create growth.

Alan Brown: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government’s Red Book at the 2017 spring Budget predicted that cuts to corporation tax would cost the UK Treasury £24 billion. How does that equate to growth?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman talks about predictions, but let us look at the past. We have cut corporation tax in every single year since 2010, but revenues from that tax have gone up. That shows exactly that the Government’s strategy is right.

Let us consider ideas about investment in our people and their education. When I go around schools in my constituency, I am struck by the fact that everyone is talking about STEM subjects—science, technology,

engineering and maths. These subjects are being fostered and encouraged by the Government. The message is very much going out, right through the educational establishment and across schools, and it is very encouraging that that is happening. In my constituency, a number of schools are looking in particular to increase STEM participation among female students, which is very exciting. All these things are part of an industrial strategy. All these things will make the country more prosperous and more productive—they will drive future productivity growth. The Government are to be commended for taking an unusually medium to long-term view of the UK economy. Far too often in this House, we sling insults, with lots of abuse and all that, and we are very focused on the short term. It is exciting that in this industrial strategy we can think in terms of the medium and longer term.

On that note, infrastructure spending is very dear to my heart, as the Member for Spelthorne. Heathrow—the “H” word—is something that this Parliament will have to decide on, hopefully in the next few months, but certainly in the next couple of years. I have always been clear about my support for the third runway—or rather, I should say, the expansion of Heathrow. That is vital to drive forward the economy, productivity growth and prosperity, so we will have to tackle that.

On the broad range of infrastructure issues, investment in human capital with regard to STEM subjects, and research and development—

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I absolutely welcome the increased investment in research and development to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but does he agree that aiming to get to the OECD average in 10 years is not exactly ambitious for this country?

Kwasi Kwarteng: There are a huge number of ambitious initiatives in the industrial strategy. We are very good in this House—Opposition Members certainly are—at running the country down and pointing out shortfalls. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) pointed out, we have some of the best universities in the world, and we have the best talent, as the Secretary of State mentioned. The trick, and the ambition, is to try to marry some of that talent with commercial productivity, and that is what the Government are trying to do. That is an exciting development. When we look at world-beating innovation and scientific research, we see that this country is right at the top of any list. We should celebrate that and try to improve on it, and I fully accept the remarks that have been made about that.

I am delighted that we are debating this issue because, as far as I can recall, it has been a very long time since we have talked about industrial strategy, certainly in this House. We are putting to bed a lot of the ghosts of the 1970s. I know that the Labour party does not necessarily want me to talk about the 1970s, but they were a disastrous era, when the so-called industrial strategy collapsed into a slightly absurd game of trying to pick winners and of backing industries that were totally failing. It is a real relief to hear a plan from the Secretary of State that moves away from some of those old ideas. Anyone who thinks we will drive innovation, R&D and talent by nationalising vast swathes of the British economy—anyone who thinks that is a viable

option—deserves some sort of break or respite, because they are clearly not thinking particularly straight. I do not think it is right to confront this country with threats of nationalisation and confiscatory taxation. I do not think that helps the investment climate, and it is not a good form of industrial strategy. I am delighted that we are discussing this, and I look forward to contributions from Opposition Members that will be made in a more constructive spirit than the speech we heard just a few minutes ago.

4.49 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I always enjoy listening to the Secretary of State; I find him a courteous and well-mannered person who tries to put forward a positive view at all times. I find the same to be the case when I work with his team.

This long-awaited industrial strategy is welcome—it is good to see something—but it lacks the substance that we should see in a document that would make a meaningful difference for people, and it misses the mark on fairness and ambition. I hope to delight the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), because along with my criticisms, of which I have many, I am going to try to be constructive and suggest some points that the Secretary of State might want to consider.

On inclusive growth, the Scottish National party has long argued that ideologically-driven measures not only are harmful to society, but actively hinder business development, growth and investment. Inclusive growth must be at the heart of any economic strategy, yet the Government continue their obsession with a failing austerity dogma, and nothing in the industrial strategy signals a change of direction. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has forecast that austerity could last until the mid-2020s, meaning that Scottish businesses, households and public services could ultimately face 15 years of austerity measures—and that amid the harsh realities of a hard Tory Brexit. The UK is facing the biggest increase in inequality since the 1980s, the worst wage stagnation in 70 years, which the IFS described as “dreadful”, and a huge increase in child poverty as a direct effect of tax and benefit reforms.

In the context of Brexit, the Global Future study was released just today. After looking into all four options available to the Prime Minister, it established that, in the long term, the amount available for spending on public services will fall. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the Canada model, there would be £877 million less per week, while under a no-deal scenario, there would be £1.25 billion less per week. For the NHS, there would be 22% less funding available if there was a bespoke deal, and 9%, 31% and 44% less under each of the other options. Of course, it is not just about the public sector. As we have found from speaking to industry after industry and sector after sector, there are many concerns across the piece about the direction of the Brexit negotiations.

Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) is no longer in the Chamber, but I wish to reflect on what he said about Jack McConnell and the post-study work visa. I have a great deal of respect for Jack McConnell, who was and remains a far-sighted politician. He recognised that Scotland requires

different measures when it comes to our immigration needs. For many decades, our problem has been one of emigration. We need people to come to Scotland. If we are to retain competitiveness and increase productivity, it is essential that Scotland's immigration system is outward-looking and that it allows businesses to attract the necessary skills to boost growth and create jobs.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: I will give way briefly in a second, but I am mindful of what Madam Deputy Speaker and Mr Deputy Speaker have said about the time available for the debate. I shall make a little progress first.

The ability to attract workers to Scotland is a vital component of how we strengthen our economic advancement and tackle demographic challenges. Over the next 10 years, some 90% of our population growth is projected to come from migration, and that will be directly affected by Brexit dogma.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to attract people, new talent and high-end jobs to Scotland. I just do not know how the SNP Government wish to achieve that by having Scotland as the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom.

Drew Hendry: Of course, in a discussion about the future of EU nationals, many of whom are very worried about their future, the hon. Gentleman tries to make a rather petty political point. What he should acknowledge is that Scotland is far from being a less attractive place. Thanks to the huge council tax hikes in England, which are the largest in 14 years—bills are up by some 5.1%—people are actually paying more tax in England than they are in Scotland.

There are roughly 181,000 EU nationals in Scotland. Half the welcome net increase in the Scottish population between 2000 and 2015 has come from people born in EU countries, yet the strategy overlooks the likely impact of immigration restrictions on UK industry. If there were a time to pause and think about the effects of immigration on people and industry, it should surely be this week, when we have seen the manifest failings of the UK Government's current immigration strategy.

Some sectors in Scotland, such as the thriving food and drink sector, are particularly reliant on the employment of EU nationals. Many businesses across Scotland and the UK employ and rely on EU workers, but the UK Government's regressive approach to immigration has failed to take proper account of that fact. It is simply not possible to replace straightforward access to the EU labour market with domestic recruitment, and replicating existing immigration rules for non-EU nationals would place significant and unnecessary costs and bureaucracy on business. As has been noted, we have had two very clear cases of people in my constituency of Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey who have been contributing to our local economy being booted out by the immigration policy of this Tory Government.

Let us now turn to the ambition of the industrial strategy. If we really want to deliver affordable energy and clean growth, it is astounding that the UK Government have failed properly to recognise renewable energy in the industrial strategy. The devastating predicted drop in renewable investment of 95% between 2017 and 2020

[Drew Hendry]

should be a wake-up call that urgent action should be taken to secure a thriving future for this dynamic sector. Of course, during that period, we have also seen the near decimation of the solar industry.

Scotland is proudly in the vanguard for the development of renewable energy projects and investment. The SNP Scottish Government have set out ambitious targets for a transition to a low-carbon economy. By contrast, the UK Government's erratic energy approach and the UK's decision to leave the European Union have created uncertainty in the sector. The UK Government have responsibility for the damaging effects that we have seen.

James Heappey *rose—*

Drew Hendry: No, I will not give way. I did say earlier that I would limit the number of interventions. I have a lot to say on this subject, and I am wary about people taking too much time early in the debate.

Carbon capture and storage technology should play a leading role in tackling climate change, yet the UK Government have been complicit in stifling investment to develop this technology, as well as showing a lack of interest in developing and protecting jobs in Scotland. We wholly condemn the decision to cancel the CCS competition, which left Peterhead betrayed, resulting in a damaged relationship between the Government and industry as well as a negative legacy on investment and consumer confidence.

We have heard warm words about new investment in CCS, and I welcome that, but what I say constructively to the Secretary of State is that one 10th of the previous required investment will not cut it in terms of making the difference that needs to be made. Sustainable energy has been a success story for Scotland in recent years, and the Scottish Government have set out an ambitious strategy for renewable investment with the powers at their disposal. We firmly believe that supporting long-term energy security and environmental protection should be a key priority for any responsible Government. A robust and sustainable strategy for energy security would not only assist the creation of a low-carbon future, but boost productivity, which has largely flatlined in the UK for far too long.

Scotland's oil and gas industry still has a prosperous future ahead of it, but support is needed to maximise the longevity and success of this dynamic industry. The industrial strategy has failed to mention any new developments in the oil and gas sector. Although I understand that work is ongoing to develop a sector deal, we remain in the dark about what this might look like. Furthermore, Brexit again poses a risk to the development of this vital sector. The Oil and Gas Institute at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen has said that the departure from the EU bloc is likely to cost the North sea oil and gas supply chain another £200 million a year in tariffs and export taxes. It is time for the Secretary of State to show the same level of support for the oil and gas sector that has been mooted for the automotive and aviation sectors.

The UK Government have ploughed ahead with costly and ineffective investments in nuclear energy projects such as Hinkley Point C at the expense of the rest of the industry. The UK Government must halt the

agenda of unexpected, cherry-picked and damaging announcements and policies in favour of making this a thorough industrial strategy for the supply and demand of energy.

I know that I will please the hon. Member for Spelthorne by saying that the UK Government must now invest more in science and in research and development. More than 50,000 international students study in Scotland, which is home to 19 educational institutions. The Scottish National party is incredibly proud of Scotland's world-class university and higher education sector, and will support the necessary steps to ensure that it remains open, outward-looking and inclusive, yet the industrial strategy offers no assurances that this relationship will be protected. I again ask the Secretary of State to make his Government take the opportunity to do this.

Science, and research and development, have the potential to thrive further in Scotland. For example, the life sciences sector in Scotland could be worth £8 billion a year by 2025, according to industry groups. Although we welcome the sector deal for the life sciences, it is particularly worrying that it was agreed without any consultation with the SNP Government. That must not be replicated in any other sector deals.

On trade and inward investment, being a member of the EU means that Scotland's businesses are operating within the world's largest trading area of 500 million potential customers. The EU single market is eight times bigger than the UK's alone. Moreover, trade with EU countries is becoming more important for Scotland. Since 2007, Scottish exports to the EU have grown by more than 25% to more than £12 billion in 2015. Although some steps are welcome, including the creation of an inward investment strategy, the mechanisms offered to overcome the challenges do not go far enough to alleviate the threat posed by the loss of EU single market membership and the trading partners that come with it. The Government must stop their reliance on rhetoric about trade and investment needs, take action to acknowledge the industry's concerns and work constructively with the Scottish Government to maximise inward investment as part of a genuinely co-operative approach.

Members of the SNP have a shared goal: to make Scotland the best place to live, work and do business. Although the UK Government have overall responsibility for the economy, we will use all the powers that we can in Scotland to try to achieve this. The SNP has had a plan with trade and investment, manufacturing, innovation and employment at its heart for a number of years, and the recent enterprise and skills review aligns its agencies and resources behind those plans.

Since 2007, the Scottish Government's central purpose has been to create a more successful country through increasing sustainable economic growth. That remains our ambition and is at the core of our single economic strategy, which was published in 2015. The strategy sets out the overarching economic approach of the Scottish Government and is backed by a series of policies to boost economic performance. We are supporting business and growing Scotland's economy by focusing on investment, internationalisation, innovation and inclusive growth; building on the successes of our enterprise and skills agencies; and developing a system of support for Scottish businesses and the economy.

An overarching strategic board is now in place that will maximise the impact of the collective investment that we make in enterprise and skills development, and it will create the conditions for delivering inclusive growth. We have also created a new enterprise agency in the south of Scotland with an interim economic partnership in place, backed with £10 million of investment. We have appointed Benny Higgins to lead the work to establish a Scottish national investment bank to support investment growth, among many other measures.

I have a lot more to say, but I am going to cut my speech short to aid progress. On fairness, we have put in place progressive social policies in Scotland. With the cost of living rising, our commitment to our social contract with the people of Scotland is more important than ever and vital for economic prosperity for all. Conservative Members have referred to the changes to income tax. Indeed, this will make Scotland the fairest-taxed part of the UK, with the majority of taxpayers paying less than elsewhere in the UK. Compared with last year, everyone earning less than £33,000 will pay less tax in Scotland. By choosing a fairer path on taxation, we will protect Scotland's cherished public services.

Given that the cost of living is rising, we will deliver a minimum 3% pay rise for public servants earning less than £36,500—75% of public sector workers—while those earning more than £36,500 will receive a 2% rise, and a cash cap will be put on increases for those earning more than £80,000. There is new investment to ensure that Scotland is the best place to do business and invest. We are investing an extra £100 million to deliver the best business rates package in the UK, increasing investment in business research and development by 70% and making a £4 billion investment in vital infrastructure—and doing much more to build a fairer Scotland.

Finally, I have some asks for the Secretary of State. Will he take on board Scotland's concerns about Brexit and its industrial strategy? The risks are real, as he knows, and they threaten the economy and people's incomes. With his overarching responsibility for the success or failure of the UK nations' economies, will he acknowledge that Scotland's economy, like those of the other nations of the UK, is unique, and will he engage in a meaningful way with the Scottish Government on the industrial strategy so that we can maximise the benefits for all and support some of the key sectors that I have outlined? Does he recognise that we need inclusive growth to prosper and will he ask the Government to put an end to austerity policies that are damaging the lives of thousands of families across all the nations of the UK?

5.7 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I am grateful, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this debate, which is important for our country, for my constituency, and, indeed, for Cumbria. I thank the Secretary of State for his very positive comments, his clear pride in our country and his pioneering ambitions, which I share.

The fourth industrial revolution will indeed bring much transformation, particularly in the green energy sector. I was pleased to hear reference to development and routes to market. The industrial strategy, the nuclear sector deal proposal and the northern powerhouse strategy

all support the case that in future this country will require much more electricity for power, heating, lighting, and, increasingly, electric vehicles. The Government's Gen III nuclear new-build programme at Hinkley Point C, Wylfa, Moorside, Sizewell C and Bradwell will only just meet the anticipated electric vehicle requirements of 18 GW of generation. By 2030, the total capacity required of the UK network could rise to over 150 GW, and with over 20% of our electricity currently provided by ageing, soon-to-be-decommissioned reactors, new-build on a grand scale is essential.

I absolutely agree that we need an energy mix. Last year, records were broken, with 15% of UK electricity provided by wind turbines. Nearly a quarter of all investment in European wind turbines took place in the UK. However, renewable energy, by its very nature, is intermittent. Renewable energy has lower energy density, requiring more sites to meet a given level of demand, and the plant sites are highly dependent on location. I therefore welcome the Government's recent investment to boost nuclear fusion research at Culham in Oxfordshire with a further £86 million to set up the technology platform at the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority's science centre. I also welcome the £56 million investment in research and development funding for new advanced modular reactor technologies, along with the launch of the next phase of the nuclear innovation programme, which is to include ambitious plans for reactor design and safety engineering, security and advanced fuels, helping to bring down the cost of new nuclear.

The UK nuclear new-build economy is worth around £75 billion. Globally, the nuclear new-build economy is worth around £1.2 trillion to 2035. To give that some context, it is a heck of a lot of money. I do not want to give Members a maths lesson, but if we were to spend £1 million every day, it would take 3,285 years—indeed, to the year 5303—to spend that amount of money. To capitalise on that huge global economy, our industry and Government must collaborate. I commend the nuclear sector deal proposal, which refers to the need for financial and policy support to bring down the cost of new nuclear, to create the pipeline of projects, including large-scale generation plants and small and advanced modular reactors and to reuse existing nuclear licensed sites.

The nuclear industry in Copeland has provided highly skilled jobs, electricity and worldwide recognition of excellence for more than 70 years. Being the first in the world to generate electricity comes with the early skills and knowledge in how to decommission—a key market for the UK, with vast potential across Europe and beyond. I see great potential for improved collaboration between civil nuclear and nuclear defence, and there can be no better area than the western coast of Cumbria for that collaboration to happen.

The legacy challenges being met at Sellafield, the low-level waste repository and the ground-breaking research and development taking place every day in the National Nuclear Laboratory, the Dalton Nuclear Institute and the 70-something nuclear supply chain companies in my Copeland constituency alone are world-leading. I have had the great privilege of visiting all those companies, which employ the 27,000 nuclear workers in Cumbria—around 40% of the country's entire nuclear workforce.

Those skills and the products are being developed to deal with the incredible challenges in difficult working environments, but they are not realising their true value

[Trudy Harrison]

to this country and to UK plc. We are not yet delivering our industrial strategy potential. Virtual reality technology, robotic vehicles and amphibious robotic vehicles are being developed in my constituency and used across our armed forces and in many highly regulated environments. I want the pioneering spirit and ability to reverse-engineer complex systems to be further developed, with better support for companies to retain their intellectual property and explore export opportunities. We are anticipating Moorside and confirmation of the successor submarine programme, Dreadnought, to be built by BAE in my neighbouring constituency to the south, in Barrow.

John Woodcock: It is even better to be able to work with the hon. Lady in three dimensions than it was to work with her two-dimensional cut-out last month. Does she agree that, if the industrial strategy for Cumbria is to work properly, we have to see the south and the west as one centre of global nuclear excellence and that the previous years of civil nuclear and military nuclear submarine programmes operating separately must be put behind us?

Trudy Harrison: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I could not agree more. He is absolutely right that there is so much more we can do to ensure that our civil nuclear and nuclear defence collaborate, which will benefit our skills agenda and meet recruitment challenges, particularly in the defence sector. I thank him for his comments.

We also have the National College for Nuclear to the north, in the neighbouring constituency of the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman). There is enormous potential for financial and policy support to develop the existing centre of nuclear excellence. I know that in Copeland, we can power the northern powerhouse and deliver the industrial strategy with Government support and collaboration. Thank you once again, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this debate.

5.14 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this industrial strategy for two reasons in particular. First, it recognises that business productivity is vital for growth, competitiveness, our standard of living and the funding of our public services. Secondly, it acknowledges that the hidden hand of free-market competition is inadequate to ensure that market forces will deliver resources in a way that will both maximise our economic potential and meet our social needs.

I am less convinced that the strategy fully grasps and incorporates the challenges that come from recognising that our taxation policies, public spending priorities and regulation are all vital to our productivity. An industrial strategy is vital to ensure that they underpin and help, not hinder, our objective.

I acknowledge that balancing conflicting public priorities with the need to promote our productivity is not always easy. Different Departments have different priorities, but the success or failure of the strategy will ultimately depend on the ability of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to get other Departments to sign up to and promote the strategy's objectives in their departmental priorities. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden)

raised that issue, and the Secretary of State made reassuring noises, which was good, but I must mention one or two obstacles that have emerged since the strategy's publication and cause me grave concern.

I represent a constituency that is heavily dependent on the success of the motor industry. Indeed, it has been a great success, with 70% of the cars that are manufactured in Britain—we are almost at record levels—exported abroad, including 56% to Europe. Productivity in that industry is vital to our national productivity and our balance of payments. Leaving aside the industry's issues around Brexit, the ill-considered and hasty announcement by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the target abolition of diesel engines, however worthy, has caused havoc in the industry. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has aptly called it the demonisation of diesel. Arising from that, Jaguar at Solihull is laying off 1,000 workers and Vauxhall is closing 326 dealerships. That is hardly a ringing endorsement by other Departments of the strategy's importance.

I fully understand the support for research and development and the extra funding for life sciences, but the strategy fails to recognise that success will depend on recruiting from schools students who take STEM subjects. There is an acute shortage of those, and although the problem is partly cultural, it is also due to the inadequacy of school funding for delivering the necessary courses and equipment.

We have some of the best universities in the world—I am not talking down Britain; they are terrific. However, to maximise their potential, they need to be able to recruit the best brains from all over the world. Unfortunately, as a result of the Home Office visa regime, there is currently a perception that Britain is no longer the best place to come for would-be students from other countries. We are taking a declining proportion of an expanding market. The Windrush scandal has exposed the culture of the Home Office, which does not seem to be signed up to the crucial objective that the strategy and our economy need.

I could mention many other aspects, but in the time available, I will finish by considering another element that I welcome: the independent strategic council—effectively, an Office for Budget Responsibility for the strategy. It is designed to develop and measure success and evaluate strategic performance. It could be crucial, but I emphasise to the Minister that it must not just be a monitoring body. It must be tasked with identifying blockages to performance not just in BEIS but in other Departments as well. How it develops will be a test of the Government's commitment to the strategy. I suspect it will become more unpopular the more successful it is. It is a challenge, and I wish it well.

5.20 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I welcome this debate and the Government's commitment to a new industrial strategy. This is a significant opportunity for us to chart a course for UK business, so that it does not merely adapt to global trends but is at the forefront, building new industries and leading global change. This is a broad debate, but the central theme is how the Government can work together with industry to shape a strategy that will develop the entire UK economy. Past Governments' interaction with industry has not always been successful

in that endeavour, and we are right to be sceptical when the state wants to get too closely involved with business, but this afternoon I would like to confine my remarks to two industries in which close Government involvement and support is not only welcome but vital for their continued success in this country.

In my constituency, just under 8,000 people are employed directly in the defence and nuclear sectors, and several thousand more rely indirectly on BAE Systems' Warton military aircraft and Springfields nuclear fuels manufacturing sites for their employment. Both facilities can continue to function only due to the sensitive, strategically important nature of those industries, and if the Government are willing and able to provide support.

The UK's military aircraft sector is worth £10 billion to our economy and provides directly tangible benefits through exports, employment, technological advancement and the development of skills. Furthermore, BAE Systems is capable of delivering a sovereign capability; in other words, the independent design and manufacture of military aircraft. We should and we must build our own military aircraft. I welcome the Government's intention to launch the combat air strategy. It will look towards a sixth generation of military aircraft, which the Secretary of State for Defence recently announced. That is another demonstration of the Government's significant commitment to delivery on behalf of those who work in our defence industry.

The Aerospace Growth Partnership, which has brought industry and Government together to tackle barriers to growth, boost exports and grow high-value jobs in the UK, published its aerospace industrial strategy in 2013. It has encouraged UK companies to co-operate more closely in addressing challenges that affect the sector as a whole, such as supply chain competitiveness, R&D and skills development. It contributed to a 30% growth in productivity during the period of the coalition Government, compared with just 3.3% across the rest of the economy. That demonstrates the huge benefits that a successful strategy can have for an industry.

We cannot stop here, however. In my constituency, a future fighter programme is required for BAE Systems to sustain its military aircraft design and development engineering capabilities. Currently, the Typhoon and F-35 programmes do not provide enough work to sustain the business that is crucial for the Fylde's economy. We simply cannot rely on getting on with what currently exists. We have to develop and devise a strategy to deliver the sixth generation of future fighters. I urge the Government not to put off the key decisions on who should partner the UK in building those aircraft, and I go further in asking that they support a European deal, which has proved highly successful for both Typhoon and its predecessor Tornado, as a partner in designing and building the next generation of military aircraft. It is clear that only a European deal can guarantee that the UK plays a full part in all the design, build and maintenance phases of manufacture. A comparison between the Typhoon and F-35 projects demonstrates that clearly. Only then can we guarantee jobs throughout the full cycle of an aircraft's lifespan, retain UK intellectual property and export overseas aircraft designed and built in the UK, sustaining high-skilled manufacturing jobs for decades to come.

My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) covered the nuclear industry in great depth, but I would like to make an appeal to the Minister and

to the Secretary of State, whom I have met on a number of occasions on this matter. It is vital that, as we roll out a new generation of nuclear generation capability in the United Kingdom, we retain the sovereign ability to manufacture nuclear fuel in this country. If we rely on importing nuclear fuel, not only does that put an enormous strain on the balance of payments, but at a time when we have the ability to manufacture nuclear fuel for any of the reactors that are currently being proposed for the UK's new fleet, it would be absurd in the extreme if we were to turn our backs on that capability and instead outsource it overseas. We live in an uncertain world, and I would like to retain that sovereign capability here.

In conclusion—he says, turning to the back page of his speech—although there is much for the Government to consider in this field, the economic value and strategic importance of the skills provided by the defence and nuclear industries mean that they deserve their primary consideration. I commend the significant steps that have been taken towards setting out the plans that the Government have for both, but we need a concrete proposal for delivering a sixth-generation fighter aircraft that guarantees long-term sustainable employment in Fylde, and indeed across Lancashire and the north-west. We need deals to guarantee that nuclear fuel is manufactured in the UK, and we need to deliver them now if we are to safeguard and grow these sectors and to sustain and then create jobs for the generations to come.

5.25 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I am very pleased to speak in this important debate, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to see that an industrial strategy for the country is at last back on the political agenda, although I have to say, without being unkind to the Tories, that we need a Labour Government prepared to make the right kind of interventions to make sure that it works.

The truth is that Britain has suffered from a long and disastrous period of deindustrialisation, which accelerated from the late 1970s and has left the country in a perilous economic state. We import too much, make too little and have suffered from a growing and now gigantic trade deficit primarily with the rest of the EU, and with Germany in particular. The industry that we have left is good—much of it is, anyway—and it has to be good to survive, but even then, our productivity levels are often too low and investment has been too little.

I am delighted that Peugeot has just announced plans to manufacture a new van at the Vauxhall plant in Luton, and we have to hope that this is a first swallow in a new industrial spring. I have put the case to motor manufacturing representatives that the recent depreciation of sterling relative to the euro should provide a sound basis for expanding supply chains in the UK manufacturing sector. That is true for other sectors, too. I was pleased that the head of Peugeot suggested just such an intervention at the time of the takeover of General Motors Europe, which included Vauxhall.

However, let me get back to the general case that Britain's manufacturing base has been seriously eroded in the last decades and that we need desperately to rebuild the sector on all fronts. We have lost out massively in trade, and in manufacturing trade in particular. The figures are stark, and I shall quote just a few to make my point. The UK current account deficit in 2016 was £111.3 billion, or 5.8% of GDP. We in the UK are paying out to other nations the net figure of nearly

[Kelvin Hopkins]

£2,000 per person every year. The goods trade deficit in 2017 was even larger, at £138 billion. The UK's overall trade deficit was £33.7 billion, but was a staggering £80 billion just with the EU. That was balanced only partially by our trade surplus of £39 billion with non-EU countries. At the core of this problem is the loss of much of our manufacturing capacity.

In 2017, the UK's manufacturing trade deficit totalled £98 billion, £79 billion of which was with the EU and some £19 billion or so with the rest of the world. That disastrous yawning chasm in trade contrasts markedly with the performance of another major European economy—namely, Germany. In 2014, Germany had a current account surplus of \$280 billion, contrasting with Britain's current account deficit of \$152 billion. We import four times more motor vehicle products from Germany than we export to it, which is just a simple illustration of the grotesque imbalance between our two countries.

Britain's balance of payments deficit has been getting dramatically worse in recent years. In the crisis year of 2008, the deficit was £55 billion, but it rose to £113.6 billion in 2017. That is simply not sustainable and has to be addressed by Government action. A re-creation of our historical industrial strength has to be the key factor in rebuilding our economy for long-term sustainable prosperity. Central to that strategy must be a benign macroeconomic environment, and an essential component of that must be an appropriate parity for sterling—an exchange rate that helps our domestic manufacturers and restrains manufactured imports. We must not price our goods out of foreign markets, above all the EU.

Britain's economy has been dogged by sterling overvaluation for many decades, and it has chronically damaged our competitiveness. Devaluations and depreciations have relieved the economic straitjacket from time to time—in 1931, 1949, 1965 and, most significantly, after the disastrous collapse of the exchange rate mechanism in 1992. A big depreciation after the 2008 crisis saved the UK from complete catastrophe, but the pound-euro exchange rate crept up again in 2016, causing more economic damage. The post-referendum depreciation has helped our manufacturers, but the balance of trade is still in dire straits.

Britain's primary exchange rate problem is with the euro—not just sterling's overvaluation but the serious undervaluation of the euro. In my view the euro is, in reality, the Deutschmark in disguise—a Deutschmark with weaker economies bolted on to it, holding down its value and giving Germany an unjustified competitive advantage both against other eurozone economies and against Britain. Britain's uncompetitive exchange rate has been our economic Achilles heel for a very long time. An appropriate exchange rate, sustained for the long term, is vital for a new industrial strategy to be successful and for a revival of Britain's greatly diminished manufacturing sector. It is an essential component of many modern industrial strategies, but not a sufficient condition for success.

Finally, I suggest to Ministers and the Secretary of State, who is not in his place, that we need to re-establish Neddy—the National Economic Development Council—in which I was personally involved when I worked at the TUC in the 1970s. The disastrous collapse of industry took place after Labour's Government. It was in 1979 to 1983 that we saw a fifth of manufacturing disappear—a

crime for which the Tories must always bear their guilt. Neddy brought together Government representatives, business representatives, employers and trade unions in a forum for manufacturing, ensuring that its vital interests were advanced to the benefit of the country and the future prosperity of all its people. Neddy should be reinvented and recreated, but it should be made much stronger.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am reducing the time limit to five minutes.

5.32 pm

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): It is good that we have an industrial strategy. It is not the command economy of past industrial strategies but an opportunity to put together a coherent plan to develop and support the industries that will underpin this country's economy in the future, boost productivity and raise the skills needed.

In that sense, we should be very excited about what the Government have done. The four grand challenges within the strategy—artificial intelligence, clean growth, dealing with an ageing society and the concept of future mobility—are essential ingredients of that future economy, but of course each does not stand alone; all entwine with one another to deliver something that is quite exciting, not just from an industrial and economic perspective, but from a social perspective and in terms of how our communities and the future economy will operate.

Within that are the sector deals. It is right that the Government are seeking to reinforce the success of current industries that have done well for the UK, such as defence and aerospace and nuclear, and looking to use these sector deals to incubate our future economy too. To be clear, in putting together this industrial strategy, focusing on the areas as it does and in looking over the horizon—while not, I suspect, trying to pick winners but trying to understand what is likely to be the bedrock of a future economy—the Government must use the industrial strategy and everything around it to facilitate disruption as much as they can. I say that because, again and again, we see that the new businesses that really change the way we live, drive down costs for consumers and drive up customer service are the ones that have come in and disrupted old and lazy industries. These industries, often underpinned by exciting advances in automation, artificial intelligence and tech, are exactly the things we have the opportunity, through good policy making in the next few years, to unleash to the benefit of UK consumers.

If I may make a political point, such an approach is in stark contrast to the rather retrograde measures proposed by the Opposition, such as a return to nationalisation, as well as their outright fear of automation, suspicion of artificial intelligence and desire to regulate almost to the point of obsolescence the gig economy that underpins so many of the businesses particularly popular with the millennial age group. It is right that Conservative Members should champion this approach.

The way in which we will really unlock all those things is by recognising that the internet of things is a very exciting proposition for our nation's economy. It will create smart homes, smart businesses and smart communities as the vehicles through which all disruptive

businesses will undoubtedly succeed. There is a catch, because we need to lead on regulating for the data challenges that come with an internet-of-things economy, with data points all over the place bringing huge amounts of very personal data into the possession of private companies. From there, self-learning AI algorithms will be able to discern things about the way in which we live our lives that are really very intimate, and we need to protect consumers from that. However, that should not stop us being hugely excited about the opportunity for this future economy, and we should use the industrial strategy to let it off its leash.

Our colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy should really look at the fact that the very many different funds they have brilliantly brought forward to address so many of the challenges for our future economy are all stand-alone ones. My final point is that I would very much like us to start to designate test towns in which we could trial such things at scale. When we are looking at the future of mobility, we will learn most only when we have, at scale, automated on-demand transport. When we are looking at how to support an ageing society, we will be able to do so only if we can see, at scale, how CivTech will actually support people in old age to live in their own homes for longer, with the savings that that will deliver to local health services. On clean growth, it is only when we can see, at scale, the advantages of a digitised, decentralised energy system—with storage, interconnected electric vehicles and demand-side response—that we will really understand such opportunities. I therefore hope that the Minister will look at the opportunity for test towns.

5.37 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I want to concentrate on one particular aspect of the Government's industrial strategy, which is what seems to be their limited work to deliver carbon capture and storage projects, with the thousands of new jobs CCS could create and the hundreds of thousands it could protect.

Yesterday, I took part in a roundtable event hosted by the Institute for Public Policy Research on northern energy industry, where I spoke about the northern energy taskforce and its recommendations on expanding low-carbon energy. The recommendations are ambitious, realistic, comprehensive and achievable, but they are also essential. The north has a huge advantage when it comes to expanding low-carbon generation: hydrogen production, in which Teesside is the biggest producer in the country; the development of energy storage; the opportunity to develop smart grids to support our industry and communities better; and, of course, carbon capture and storage.

I chair the all-party group on carbon capture and storage, and I know that both parliamentarians and people from industry have been very disappointed and frustrated at the lack of comprehensive action on this issue. Two years ago, the Government cancelled the CCS competition to establish one or two projects at the Humber and in Scotland. Since then, we have been trying to play catch-up, and while there have been encouraging words from the Government about possible investment, every moment of delay is a continued failure. Delays are also giving countries the opportunity to steam ahead of us so far that we will never reap the benefits that CCS can bring to the UK.

Carbon capture is vital not only to create and support industry and to increase productivity and profitability, but in delivering the clean growth grand challenge, in that it would deliver a long-term sustainable future for key industries such as chemicals, steel, cement and oil refining, and it would enable low-carbon fossil fuels to continue to provide a clean, flexible source of electricity.

I was a little encouraged when the Government published their clean growth strategy in October last year, which includes the intention to develop a new approach to carbon capture and storage, but I am concerned about its ambition of deploying CCS at scale during the 2030s, subject to cost reduction. I am afraid we need much more than ambition when it comes to this issue; we need robust plans that deliver our capability and need. I am afraid that the 2030s will be far too late—long after other countries have steamed ahead of us and taken the opportunity.

I am proud to represent a Teesside constituency, and it is deeply frustrating for me to see the potential that we have to be a key CCS site while the Government talk a good talk but appear slow to real action. The Teesside Collective is based in my area, and one of its main projects is decarbonisation. The collective is industry-led. Those industries know what they are talking about, and they know what they can achieve given the right environment. Teesside's concentration of industrial emitters and proximity to potential storage sites under the North sea means that the area is industrially and geographically suited to be the starting place for large-scale industrial decarbonisation in the United Kingdom. We also have the potential for a large-scale CCS-ready power station, which would add huge value to any project in the area.

While I trust that I will always be Teesside-focused, it is important for us also to focus on developing CCS in other countries and regions, such as Scotland, Yorkshire and Humber, the north-west and Wales. A number of potential projects are already being considered, and the Government need to create a framework in which they can be successfully delivered.

CCS is also an essential part of the lowest-cost route to achieving the UK's climate change targets. The Committee on Climate Change has said that the Government should not even be considering any scenario to meet the 2050 target that does not include CCS. If we are not to be left behind, we need the first CCS projects to begin operating in the 2020s. While the £100 projects to support that work is welcome, the Government will need to do much more to ensure its success. The development of low-carbon industrial clusters would constitute a major upgrade to UK infrastructure for a decarbonised economy, supporting regional growth at a time when the outlook appears shaky at best.

Sadly, by the time we see the report from the Cost Challenge Taskforce we shall be three years behind where we should have been. The time is now. I believe that the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth who visited Teesside recently, does "get" CCS, but we need her to bang on the doors of the Treasury and come up with the money that is needed to push these matters further forward.

It is vital for the deployment pathway to set out a strong and clear approach to CCS that will enable the first projects to begin operating in the 2020s—and that

[Alex Cunningham]

is 10 years earlier than the Government appear to be planning. Our industries need to know that the Government are on their side and are prepared to work in partnership and share the financial risk as CCS is developed.

5.42 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It was a pleasure to hear the Secretary of State, in his opening remarks, speak of the importance of a strategy to help businesses to create quality, well-paid, sustainable jobs. In any walk of life, we need a roadmap to tell us how to get somewhere. That can be achieved through a strategy that involves both playing to our strengths and attending to our weaknesses. The Secretary of State was very frank about the weaknesses that we face, one of which is the issue of productivity. I want to focus on the five foundations for improving productivity: ideas and innovation, people, infrastructure, the right business environment, and the right places.

Companies and organisations are developing those themes at Ansty Park, in the east of my constituency. The site has been visited by the Secretary of State himself, and the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), will recall doing so as well. It came into its own with the development of the Manufacturing Technology Centre, one of the first Catapult centres. I am disappointed not to have heard any acknowledgement from Opposition Members of the role of those centres. The centre will develop ideas, and will enable us to turn discoveries—and we have been great at discoveries—into commercial products. It is changing the landscape of manufacturing. When I first visited it just after my election in 2010, it was a building site; now it has 65 industrial members working in new technologies.

We will also exploit innovation and ideas at the High Temperature Research Centre at Ansty Park, which is the result of a collaboration between Rolls-Royce and the University of Birmingham and a £60 million investment. It measures 62,000 square feet, and provides a unique casting, design, simulation and advanced manufacturing research facility focusing on aerospace.

A newcomer to the site is the London Electric Vehicle Company's factory, where an investment of £250 million has been dedicated to the construction of the electric taxis that are now on the streets of London. It will provide the clean growth that the industrial strategy is intended to achieve, and it will be supported by the £400 million investment in charging infrastructure. The London EV Company's new factory at Ansty has been a real success story.

Over the road from the London Electric Vehicle Company is Fanuc, manufacturer of the widest range of robots in the world, and if we want to increase our productivity through investment we will do so through this new industrial landscape. Robots have applications from micro-electronics assembly to the forging of precision aerofoils for jet engines.

We will also create our industrial growth and development through working on our people. The MTC has a state-of-the-art Lloyds bank training centre, opened in 2015 by the former Business Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), and was set

up to address the skills gap in UK engineering. Between 2015 and 2020, 1,000 apprentices will be trained in the latest technology.

Importantly, the MTC also engages with the community to support young people into engineering and STEM subjects. A year or two ago, I was with 30 local schoolgirls from Bilton School in my constituency who received the chance to have a hands-on training challenge at the centre.

The site continues to develop. AVL is due to open a new test and engineering centre this spring. It will be operating state-of-the-art testbeds for advanced powertrains, including hybrid and battery electric vehicles. If that is not cutting-edge, advanced technology, I do not know what is.

The site will be added to again very shortly by Meggitt, which has recently been given planning consent by Rugby Borough Council. It is important to recognise the role local authorities can play in achieving objectives: a proactive local authority responsive to new development can achieve these things. Meggitt is developing a £130-million international aerospace and defence engineering centre to serve as a hub for the next generation of world-class innovation in aerospace thermal management technology. That will consolidate Meggitt's presence in the business and provide a further 1,000 jobs in the area.

I am proud of what is happening in my constituency. It exemplifies what we mean by an industrial strategy, providing an environment for both new and well-established companies to help make the UK a more attractive place to start and grow a business, with a stimulus provided by our link to the first-class research and development opportunities at the Manufacturing Technology Centre.

5.47 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Erdington is rich in talent, but is one of the poorest constituencies in the country. It is, however, blessed by the industrial belt that stretches along the M6, at the heart of which is the giant Jaguar plant. Back in 2010, I was involved with the new management brought in by Tata to turn around the plant from closure. It has gone from strength to strength since and has doubled in size. Just up the Chester Road from the Jaguar plant is GKN—Guest, Keen and Nettlefolds—a 259-year-old company which, on the back of the success of Jaguar, has gone from 500 to 800 employees. It is at the heart of a motor manufacturing cluster in the midlands—a world-class success story that is in part built on foundations that we laid in government with the establishment of the Automotive Council.

However welcome some of the things said today about industrial strategy are, developments in relation to both Jaguar Land Rover and GKN potentially make a mockery of that talk. The Secretary of State is a good man with whom I have worked over the years, such as on the Heseltine initiative in 2012 and on securing investment for the new low-emission engine plant in Wolverhampton in 2012-13, but the simple reality is that Jaguar Land Rover is facing mounting problems with the combination of uncertainty over Brexit on the one hand and the grotesque mishandling of the transition from diesel on the other.

We have gone down from 3,000 workers in the Jag to 2,200, with no production for six weeks, and now 1,000 are being laid off at Solihull, with 360 workers being transferred from the Jag over to Solihull. Little wonder that when the workers were briefed on Monday, they were described to me as being “numb.” So, too, were the GKN workers when I was with them in the Driveline plant on that bleak day of 29 March with the takeover by Melrose. It was a rerun of what happened over Cadbury. I led the battle against the Kraft takeover of Cadbury, when a debt-laden American multinational took over a successful and profitable British icon because 31% of the shares were bought by hedge funds.

Exactly the same thing happened over GKN. We had hoped, after Cadbury, that progress would be made on a new corporate takeover regime. We had discussions with the Government at the time about freezing the share register at the time of a bid, for example, and about a proposal for shareholders needing to have held shares for six months before they could vote. We discussed a whole range of potential mechanisms, including a public interest test, but little progress was made and GKN was ultimately left open to a predator, Melrose, as vultures such as Elliott—described as the world’s most ruthless hedge fund—circled. They were utterly cynical in their approach. They were there for a matter of weeks in a company with a 259-year-old history, and their aim was simply to make a quick buck on the back of that corporate takeover. Theirs was a fleeting interest, and it was fundamentally wrong.

I welcome some of the contents of the industrial strategy, but I hope that the Government will listen to the wise words of the shadow Secretary of State about going yet further, crucially on Jaguar Land Rover and on the lessons of GKN. On Jaguar Land Rover, the transition to electric has been called a just transition, and all parties should be involved in the next stage: the road to zero. Crucially, that will need support from the Government—for research and development, for example—but that has been nowhere near good enough so far. Investment in infrastructure will also be needed. In parallel to that, I have to say that there must be no more playing to the gallery, exciting fears in the meantime, by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. His statements on the transition from diesel have been at the heart of the collapse in diesel car sales by 37%, despite the fact that the new diesel technology is infinitely better for the environment than the old.

On GKN, I still hope that the Government will use their power under section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002. If they do not, the guarantees given thus far will simply not go far enough. The most immediate task for the Government is to ensure that they play their part in extracting cast-iron guarantees for the future. They must then look towards introducing a Cadbury-GKN law. There must be no more leaving it to the market, red in tooth and claw—what the *Daily Mail* called “an abuse of capitalism”. Crucially, at the centre of our industrial strategy, to achieve a long-termism of approach, we need a new corporate takeover regime that is in the best interests of British industry, British investors and British workers. That is what our country needs, and it is what we look to the Government to deliver.

5.52 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this important debate. The industrial strategy is an important document that contains crucial objectives relating to skills and young people. The importance of the skills agenda is particularly demonstrated in my own area, where the offshore renewables sector is playing a major role in the area’s economic expansion. Indeed, the Government have referred to the Humber estuary as the “energy estuary”. We have a number of important training facilities, such as the CATCH facility in Stallingborough, which was set up as a joint operation funded by the Government, local authorities and industry. The Secretary of State himself has visited the Grimsby Institute, where he launched a previous skills initiative. Leaving the European Union provides us with many opportunities, but we need to invest in research and development, and we also desperately need to invest in our infrastructure. I am pleased to say that the Government have taken that matter particularly seriously.

A crucial element in the document is regional growth, and I know that the Secretary of State is particularly committed to that. He has visited the Grimsby-Cleethorpes area on a number of occasions, and I know that he is familiar with the problems and the opportunities that exist there. He will, I am sure, have taken note of the importance of the seafood processing industry in the area, as well as the offshore renewables sector and the chemicals, ports and logistics industries. We also have two of the country’s six oil refineries. Cleethorpes, being the jewel in the crown of the east coast, is very important for tourism. I can see that you are eager to visit it yourself, Mr Deputy Speaker. You would be most welcome, and you would enjoy the best fish and chips in the country.

I am sure that Ministers would be disappointed if I did not mention page 226 of the document, which refers to the Greater Grimsby town deal. In fairness to Governments of both colours, there has been much investment in our cities and city regions over the past 20 years, but that has emphasised the relative decline of some of our smaller towns in the provinces, particularly our coastal communities. To combat that, the local authority, the local enterprise partnership and, crucially, local industry have come together to create the Greater Grimsby project board, which has put forward several important proposals encompassing a town deal that would boost the area tremendously, reducing the differential between our cities and towns. The Prime Minister herself has referred to “left behind” towns, and our coastal communities sadly fall into that category.

As I mentioned, the project board is led by the private sector, but it includes the local enterprise partnership and local authorities. We have put detailed proposals to the Government, and they are grinding their way through the various Departments, but the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is primarily responsible for town deals. Our most recent meeting was with Lord Henley, who has now taken over day-to-day responsibility for the strategy, and I urge the Minister to give us some indication of when we can expect a decision on the deal. At that meeting, it was suggested that we might get a decision by June or July. I suspect that the Minister will not want to give a definite date today, but I urge him to push things forward as quickly as possible.

The industrial strategy clearly presents huge opportunities for areas such as northern Lincolnshire. The shadow

[*Martin Vickers*]

Secretary of State, in fairness to her, did acknowledge that even a future Labour Government would not go about picking winners, but it was rather depressing to hear the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) turning the clock back to the days of the Neddies—I think there were even “Little Neddies”—with prices and income falls and the winters of discontent. All that could come again if, sadly, the Labour party comes to power.

Kelvin Hopkins: I remember the 1970s very well, but it was between 1979 and 1983 that we saw a collapse. We had a Tory Government who were determined to introduce the new free market world, which saw British industry almost disappear.

Martin Vickers: The hon. Gentleman may or may not be correct in his analysis, but the reason why we had a Conservative Government in 1979 was the collapse of the economy during the late 1970s. There had to be a big shakeout and an acknowledgement of the failed policies of the '60s and '70s, so he should reflect on the fact that this industrial strategy is about the future and how we can become a global trading nation in the post-Brexit economy.

In conclusion, I hope the Minister will acknowledge my point about the town deal, which is the main point of my contribution.

5.58 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The British economy can best be described by the saying all that glitters is not gold. At first glance, things appear relatively rosy with modest growth, unemployment down and moderately stable consumer confidence. However, if we scratch just below the surface, a deeply troubling picture emerges, and it is a story of a productivity crisis, precipitous personal debt, a dangerous overreliance on financial services and a gaping chasm between London and the rest of the country.

I was therefore pleasantly surprised when the Prime Minister announced, in that fateful speech on the steps of 10 Downing Street, her intention to develop an industrial strategy. Wherever we look in the world, the successful countries are the ones with a Government who have been an active partner of business, using their scale, and convening capability and financial firepower, to create long-term platforms for national success. If we are to succeed as a country, we need a Labour vision of government. We need a Government who enable people and businesses to make the most of their talents, who are a true and proactive partner of business and industry, who are prepared to address the structural weaknesses of the UK economy and who are ready to tackle the causes of the malaise, rather than simply tinker with the symptoms.

There can be no doubt that the most important single cause of the huge imbalances that afflict our economy is the shrinking of our manufacturing base. In the 1970s, manufacturing accounted for around 30% of our GDP; today it stands at barely 10%. The knock-on effects of that decline have been profound. Thanks to the erosion of our manufacturing base, we have seen wealth and resources sucked into the services sector, which has been great for London and the south-east and devastating for the rest of the country.

We have seen a wholesale shift from production into consumption. We have seen a catastrophic collapse of our productivity. We have seen a massive increase in our trade deficit. And, perhaps most damaging of all for the future of our country and our politics, we have seen a fundamental sense of the communities in our industrial heartlands being left behind.

A proper industrial strategy should focus relentlessly on redressing those dangerous and deeply damaging imbalances. A comprehensive, broad-based strategy would spark a modern manufacturing renaissance across the length and breadth of our country, but what we have seen from this Government is an approach to industrial strategy that is set to entrench rather than address the imbalances. Rather than committing to a broad-based industrial strategy that supports our foundation industries and puts the foundational building blocks in place for the manufacturing base, our Government are instead intent on focusing on going into the stratosphere of space research and life sciences.

Research from Sheffield Hallam's centre for regional economic and social research shows that the focus of the Government's industrial strategy challenge fund is on sectors that disproportionately benefit London and the south-east. By focusing R&D on an exceptionally narrow range of sectors—healthcare and medicine, robotics and artificial intelligence, batteries, self-driving vehicles and space tech—we will end up only really benefiting the so-called golden triangle of London, Oxford and Cambridge. That is a blatant and outrageous abdication of the Government's responsibility for the entire economy, not just for those sectors that may have certain pockets of political support.

Exhibit A in the Government's failing strategy is its approach to the steel industry. The town I represent is the hub of our steel industry, and the Port Talbot steelworks is the beating heart of my community in Aberavon. Last September—almost eight months ago—the Government received the steel sector deal, a comprehensive plan for how we can turn the British steel industry from one that is surviving into one that is thriving. The plan would involve an additional £1.5 billion of investment over the next five years, increasing production by 40%, creating 2,000 more jobs, training 200 more apprentices a year and increasing investment in R&D. The plan has the support of companies and unions, but it has sat on a shelf, gathering dust, for eight months.

I implore the Secretary of State to confirm today when the steel sector deal will be approved, and I urge him to stop treating us like children or idiots. If the Government are giving up on the sector deal, and on the steel industry, Ministers should come clean today and say that from the Dispatch Box.

A successful industrial strategy cannot do everything for everyone, but it must do something for everyone. As things stand, this industrial strategy fails that test. If the Government really want a broad-based industrial strategy, they have to start with a broad-based manufacturing renaissance, and that starts with delivering a sector deal for the steel industry.

6.3 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I welcome today's debate because the UK Government's industrial strategy is hugely significant and could be transformational for all parts of the

United Kingdom. It is fair to say that the industrial strategy has been welcomed by a huge variety of organisations, including organisations that are not common bedfellows. The CBI is positive about the strategy and the TUC calls it “an important step forward.”

There is cross-sector acknowledgement that the industrial strategy is a serious piece of work that is genuinely trying to identify and address the challenges that our economy will face in the next few years. It is the role of Government to support and develop industry and to pursue economic growth, and I am broadly in favour of the non-interventionist but highly engaged approach. With this industrial strategy, we have gone right back to basic principles, and the UK Government have identified five foundations that are essential for a successful economy. These five foundations show how in Scotland the industrial strategy will need to be implemented by both the UK and Scottish Governments. Devolved government has control over significant parts of the five foundations, including skills, transport and housing. I am pleased that the UK Government understand that point and have repeatedly acknowledged that it is vital to work with the devolved Administrations to implement the industrial strategy. I hope that the Scottish Government—I note that Scottish National party Members are currently absent from the Chamber—are able to accept this commitment at face value and work constructively with their counterparts here at Westminster.

I would like to focus my remarks on what has been identified as the fifth foundation: places. I think we all accept that, to have a productive economy, we need prosperous communities, but what does that mean in practice for the United Kingdom? The industrial strategy identifies four challenges that need to be addressed to put the UK at the forefront of industries of the future. These are understandably forward-looking, but I do think it omits a current challenge: the dominance of London in the UK's economic output. I would like to make it clear that the success of our nation's capital is something of which we should all be proud. London is a truly global city, an economic powerhouse and a cultural masterpiece. Its contribution to the UK goes well beyond the fact that it accounts for 22% of our GDP. We will not drive our economy forward by holding London back, but it remains the case that London dominates our economy in a way that is almost unique.

That matters because it has resulted in an imbalance in our nation's economy. The domination of London has created a self-perpetuating cycle where new investment flocks to the city because that is where everyone else is. This has created wealth and economic growth, but it has also been centred on the one city.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Northern Ireland has benefited from IT and digital tech industries to such an extent that our region is equal in this to London in the delivery of jobs and opportunities.

John Lamont: The hon. Gentleman makes the point well.

As a Scottish MP, I think London's domination has to change, not because I think Scots look enviously at London, but because rebalancing our economy and spreading power across all parts of the United Kingdom strengthens our bond in that Union. The Conservative manifesto last year pointed out:

“For our civil service and major cultural bodies to claim to be UK institutions, they need to represent and be present across our whole United Kingdom.”

Let us push ahead with the proposal to use Brexit as a catalyst to create more civil servant jobs outside London. As we are talking about the industrial strategy, why not, for example, base the Industrial Strategy Council outside London? Let us focus on bringing the economy outside London up to speed. The city deals for Scotland, including the proposed Borderlands growth deal in my area, are part of this, but we need to do more. The industrial strategy represents an opportunity to drive forward the economy of the UK as a whole, and I hope that Scotland's two Governments can work together with this common aim.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: A four-minute limit now applies. Of course Members are free to interrupt each other if they wish, but it will, to put it bluntly, screw up somebody's chances, and that would be a pity.

6.8 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State, in his opening remarks, made several mentions of UK success in terms of Nobel prize winners, so I just want to remind the House that Kilmarnock Academy, in my constituency, is one of the few schools in the UK that has educated two Nobel prize winners.

I welcome the publication of the industrial strategy and the fact that the original consultation document recognised some of the failings in UK industry, particularly on productivity. However, the strategy has a glaring omission regarding the challenges—Brexit. The industrial strategy seems to pretend that Brexit is not happening, even though the UK Government's own analysis shows it will have an impact on the UK economy. We need to know what is going to happen to R&D collaboration and to R&D funding, and we need to take action to mitigate any impact.

We also need to know what is going to happen to other funding streams, such as European regional development fund moneys. In my constituency, industrial engineering units are constructed with the aid of the ERDF moneys. What is going to plug that gap in future? What are the UK Government going to do to provide that assistance to the areas that need that development money? I welcome the industrial strategy's principles, including the sector deals, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said, the Scottish Government need to be involved and properly consulted on them. They were not consulted on the advanced life sciences sector deal. If they were properly consulted, I am sure we would already have an oil and gas sector deal.

Let us look at what the UK Government have done in recent years to support the oil and gas industry. In the spring 2016 Budget, they reduced the supplementary charge to 10%. That was welcome, but the £1 billion that that cost the Treasury was only a third of the inheritance tax giveaway to millionaires. That shows the Government's real priorities. In the spring 2017 Budget, there was a paragraph promising another discussion paper. We are still awaiting the appointment of an oil and gas ambassador. In the November 2017 Budget, the transferable tax history mechanism was a welcome measure

[Alan Brown]

for the oil and gas industry, but it is predicted to bring an extra £70 million into the Treasury, so it is hardly a concession; it is actually a positive move. Actions are always stronger than words, and so far the UK Government have failed to provide the broad shoulders that we were told about. In the same period, they pulled £1.5 billion from the carbon capture and storage scheme in Peterhead.

Another innovative and possibly world-leading energy project is the proposed renewable energy plant at Grangemouth to replace the existing end-of-life gas turbine station. The new proposals include biomass, which means the project needs access to renewable heat incentive funding and contract for difference funding. Right now, however, the UK Government are seeking to cap the RHI funding available to any scheme at 250 GWh, which would make the project completely unviable. I urge the Secretary of State to do everything he can to make sure that the project goes ahead.

The industrial strategy rightly highlights offshore wind development via the Catapult, which is welcome. With onshore wind currently at £57.50 per MWh, we clearly need to continue in this direction, because that provides much better value for money than Hinkley, at £92.50 per MWh. I repeat the plea for onshore wind projects to be allowed to bid in future CfD auctions. That would reinvigorate the industry and provide a boost to engineering and fabrication companies throughout the UK.

Another sector deal that I welcome is the one for the construction industry, which will provide high-paid jobs, but, as I highlighted earlier, the £24 billion giveaway in corporation tax would be better used in the construction industry and would double the money available for the national productivity investment fund over this Parliament. I have one more plea: we really need to see the Ayrshire growth deal happen.

6.12 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. This is an exciting time for British business, particularly the UK ceramics, advanced manufacturing, digital and logistics industries that do so much to create jobs and prosperity in Stoke-on-Trent.

I am delighted to have visited several businesses in the city over the Easter recess: Don-Bur, which makes some of the most technologically advanced trailers for lorries; Michelin, which is leading the way with retreads for tyres; and Midway Manufacturing, which specialises in bespoke electronics and, I am pleased to say, has expanded and just relocated to Longton in my constituency. Stoke-on-Trent is on the up, and it is businesses like those that are driving the resurgence of our great city—as, indeed, they are driving economic growth throughout the country, underpinned by the internationally competitive tax and regulation framework delivered by this Government.

Stoke-on-Trent is increasingly seen as an attractive place for businesses to locate and invest. From my recent Adjournment debate, the Minister will know about my personal ambition to see Stoke-on-Trent's ceramics economy grow to an annual £1 billion in gross value added. Now is the time for the Government to help to underpin and realise that growth by building a sector deal for the ceramics industry into our modern

industrial strategy. I am committed to the creation of a national research centre—indeed, a dedicated international institute for ceramics—in the authentic world capital of ceramics, Stoke-on-Trent.

Increasingly, advanced and technical ceramics are being used throughout the global economy. We all know about tiles, crockery and household ornaments, but ceramics are also used in thermal barrier ceramic coatings for jet engines, in ceramic armour, and even on the space shuttle. They are used in semiconductors for electronics and in healthcare and many other industries. Our industrial strategy must ensure that it is global Britain that harnesses the power of the 21st century advanced ceramics manufacturing industry. A British, authentically place-based research centre for ceramics, focused on Stoke-on-Trent, will be a magnet for exceptional research, design and talent.

A sector deal for ceramics can realise the potential for enhanced skills, education, apprenticeships and training. This will keep UK ceramics internationally competitive as a world leader in products and technology and a driver of British exports. Although the world of ceramics defines Stoke-on-Trent—we are the Potteries after all—we have a wide range of vibrant industries to encourage and support. Our local economy is more diverse than ever before. As I said at the beginning of my speech, logistics and bespoke electronics are part of our economy, as are industries ranging from retail to advanced technical engineering through to bespoke digital security. I totally agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) said about the potential of modular nuclear reactors. I hope that they can be at least partly manufactured at Goodwin International in Stoke South.

The industrial strategy needs to have an eye on the skills needed for these industries to emerge, grow and flourish—not just academic or technical qualifications, but personal skills such as innovation, enterprise, flexibility, and resilience. This is all about making our communities, our city and our country more productive and more prosperous and ensuring that everybody is able to access these opportunities to live up to their full potential.

6.15 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Although it is easy to adopt a declinist outlook about Scotland's long-term industrial trajectory over the past century, it is important that we do not view the loss of the once iconic staple industries of shipbuilding, steel and coal, which had their genesis in the first industrial revolution, as part of a terminal decline of our manufacturing capability. Indeed, it is a sector that we urgently need to reposition at the heart of our economic future to maximise our country's productive potential.

Currently, Scotland's productivity ranks in the third quartile of OECD countries, and although productivity growth has been better than the UK average since 2009, the rate of productivity growth in Scotland lags behind many of our competitors. To catch up, Scotland must expedite a significant increase in that rate. Achieving the required growth would be truly transformational. Increasing Scotland's productivity to the level of the top quartile of OECD countries would grow GDP by almost £45 billion—an increase of 30%—and annual average wages could be more than £6,500 higher. That would be an increase of 25%, which is a huge prize.

It is in Scottish manufacturing that we can find the prime mover towards any significant realisation of that opportunity for enhanced productivity. The firms in that sector continue disproportionately to drive innovation, investment and international exports.

On some measures, Scotland's innovation performance is improving. However, performance still significantly lags behind many other countries on key innovation measures. Despite some signs of improvement, Scotland's research and development performance continues to be below that of the UK and most OECD countries. Although business enterprise R&D increased by 45% to £905 million per annum between 2010 and 2014, which was faster than the OECD and UK average, Scotland's performance is near the bottom of the third quartile of OECD countries. To reach the top quartile, Scottish R&D investment would need to be 200% higher—an increase of £1.8 billion. The need to close that gap is critical. Although 2,790 businesses in Scotland invested in R&D in 2014—an increase of 23% since 2012—R&D remains heavily concentrated, with just 10 businesses accounting for 45% of the total investment in R&D in Scotland. Almost 70% of R&D investment is by non-Scottish-owned businesses.

Labour plans to support the growth of Scottish engineering and manufacturing in a number of ways. It would create a national investment bank that would see £20 billion of capital structured in Scotland for industrial strategy and investment. The SNP has recently announced the creation of a Scottish investment bank, but it will be capitalised to the tune of a mere £322 million. If the SNP is so inspired by our policies, it might as well do it properly and ensure that the Scottish investment bank is appropriately and properly scaled, so that funding is made available in this vital area.

It is also Labour policy to set up a national transformation fund, which would see £40 billion of capital investment in Scotland, in areas such as infrastructure and house building, creating jobs and boosting the economy. In total, Labour policy in Scotland would see £70 billion of investment in industry in Scotland. That is the scale that is needed—it needs to be to the tune of billions of pounds of investment, not just millions of pounds.

The country stands on the cusp of a great disruptive opportunity with a new industrial revolution emerging. It is therefore imperative that the nation's industrial base is encouraged to adopt the characteristics required to advance growth by being more innovative and international, while investing adequately in the most advanced plant and processes. These are not alien ideas; they are some of the very same ones that originally drove Scotland's capacity to lead the world in industrial development through the 19th century.

We must seize the opportunity to issue a clarion call to reindustrialise Scotland. The country does have one distinct advantage over most others, in that it has done most of this already, albeit quite some time ago, although it may have failed to learn the most challenging lessons about its weaknesses as well as its many strengths. The trick now is to learn from both and do it all over again.

6.19 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): This debate is about the future, so I want to talk about the 19th century. To set the scene, new technologies are

sweeping away centuries-old techniques, placing whole professions at the risk of extinction. The year is 1841, and a royal commission is publishing its report on the condition of handloom weavers.

Back then, 100,000 handloom weavers had lost their jobs in just 10 years thanks, in part, to the new power loom. The remaining 300,000 were living in increasingly appalling conditions. Today, Parliament has the same duty to cab drivers, lorry drivers and, increasingly, to white collar professionals such as accountants and lawyers. We would do well to look at what our predecessors found.

The commissioners proposed a number of immediate solutions, not least some reform of the corn laws. But they were more interesting when they considered the Luddite case to tax power looms so that the less well paid hand weavers could be protected. The commissioners concluded that

“if we were insane enough to legislate against power-loom...the consequence would be not to raise the wages of the hand-loom weaver, but to depress those of the power-loom weaver to his level.”

Likewise, they concluded that taxing foreign cloth would not help much either. They backed the new technology, realising that investing in it would put the UK at a greater advantage.

The commissioners found again and again that the solutions were measures that would improve the general quality of life and embrace technology, not protect vested interests. If only the RMT would read their report, we might already have driverless trains. Time and again, the evidence showed that the workers who resisted change and clung on to a diminishing industry were those who then suffered most. The work done by Matthew Taylor in this regard is in the same vein. Crucially, the commissioners wrote bluntly that

“aversion to change...prevails in proportion as education is deficient.”

In short, constituents then and now resisted a brighter future because they thought, quite wrongly, that it was worse than a diminishing standard of living by clinging to old ways. This Parliament, as the Victorians did, has a duty to excite our constituents about the prospects of technological advancement just as much as it has to guard against the perils that modern technology brings—for instance, in the misuse of our data.

The approach that the commissioners suggested was in part to make reforms, such as to the corn laws, but they also realised that the revolution was coming for all industries, just as the internet will affect all industries now. Our Victorian predecessors were brave enough to embrace that reality, and we should be, too. The 1841 report, for instance, refers to a school of design that had recently been set up, because it was human capital that was most valuable. Machines were rubbish at creativity, but humans were brilliant at it. Similarly, the commissioners sought to protect copyright and improve workers' rights, just as we do in this industrial strategy.

There is much more to say about the 1841 report and, frankly, I had written a much longer speech. There was by necessity a local approach to our industrial strategy in the 19th century. If I may end with one plea, it is that today we consider devolving responsibilities for skills to local areas so that we, too, can cater to our local areas and industries. It is by being local that we may be truly

[*Matt Warman*]

international in our ambitions and successes. It is by not repeating the mistakes of the past—whether protectionism or clinging on to old technologies—that Britain can truly make the most of its potential.

6.23 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I am delighted to speak briefly in this debate on a topic that is so important to our country and economy. I welcome the industrial strategy, which highlights the fact that the Government appreciate the need to be an engine for change. That is more important now than ever before, with Brexit, the technological revolution and the changing nature of the labour market.

The industrial strategy sets out five foundations of economic policy, but perhaps the most important foundation is people. People are the backbone of the economy and business and the inventors and engineers of technology. We need a flexible workforce in today's economy and tomorrow's, so we need to ensure that the labour market has the correct skills to be flexible and progress our economy.

Currently, though, we have a skills gap, as Members in all parts of the House have recognised. I am passionate about tackling the skills gap in Wiltshire and the UK, having called it “the ticking time bomb” previously in this place. In fact, research from the Open University has found that the skills shortage means that there is a cost to UK business of more than £2 billion a year in higher salaries, recruitment costs and temporary staffing. The skills gap is particularly stark in the STEM and engineering sector. According to EngineeringUK, about 1.3 million workers are required each year to replace the ageing workforce and those leaving the sector. That is particularly pertinent in Wiltshire, which is a hub of engineering, design and technology. Every year, I hold my own festival of engineering. Last year, more than 3,000 students attended, and I hope to do it again this year in the Year of Engineering.

I welcome the investment of an additional £406 million in maths, digital and technical education, which will help to address the shortages in the STEM sector, but I believe that T-levels will prove the key to tackling the skills gap. The UK currently ranks 16th out of 20 OECD countries for the proportion of people with technical qualifications across STEM areas, whereas T-levels will provide a qualification that is academically regarded as well as being backed by industry. It will be relevant, applicable and without stigma. For too long, the technical pathway has been littered with confusion and with various different routes.

I also welcome the ability for us to foster a flexible workforce through the creation of a national retraining scheme by the end of the Parliament, including a £64 million investment in digital and construction retraining. In essence, the beneficiaries of all this will be people. It will help to create highly skilled and better-paid jobs for the next generation, improving living standards across the country.

A core mission of the industrial strategy is to tackle our productivity lag. That is a real problem, and the industrial strategy provides us with real solutions. It is a huge opportunity. The national productivity investment fund will provide an additional £31 billion of investment

over six years, which will enable us to seize this opportunity, rather than talking down our country and our economy, as Opposition Members have done today.

This is a long-term strategy. It is not a theory but an action plan, involving more than £460 billion of projects currently sitting in the infrastructure and construction pipeline. Most importantly, it will tackle the skills gap and the productivity lag that for too long have impeded our economic growth.

6.27 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): We are in the middle of the fourth industrial revolution—a time of huge technological, demographic and environmental change—and the decisions we make now are crucial to our future. I welcome the focus brought by this industrial strategy, and particularly its focus on innovation. I am proud to serve on the Science and Technology Committee. It is science and research that delivers the innovation that drives a modern economy, and we are a world leader in science and research. Four of our universities are in the world's top 10, one in six of the world's top research papers are written here, and we have more Nobel prize winners than any country other than the US.

But we cannot rest on our laurels. Countries such as India and China are accelerating their investment and they want to woo our best scientists. That is why it is absolutely right that this Government are investing more in science and technology than any other Government in the past 40 years. Scientific innovation is not just about money—it is about people, too. World-class science needs world-class people. I am pleased that this industrial strategy establishes the Rutherford fund to help recruit researchers, doubles the number of tier 1 visas and gives a commitment to make it easier for world-class researchers to settle here. However, the devil is in the detail. We need a visa system that makes mobility easy for scientists. I thank the Secretary of State for the answer he gave on that earlier.

Research is changing. It is not just done by one scientist in one lab working alone; it is delivered through networks of collaboration. This industrial strategy points out that our closest relationships and collaborations are with EU member states. Britain has led the EU framework programmes, and I worked with Ministers to lead the latest one. More British scientists participate in them, and more hold European Research Council grants, than those from any other country. It is in our national interest to continue to participate. Ministers have confirmed that if the next framework is materially the same as the last one, Britain would like to continue. I ask them to make that point more positive by saying that we will continue to participate unless it is materially different.

We need to ensure that the best ideas are not just generated here but also developed and manufactured here. That is why I welcome the sector by sector focus in the strategy, and I would like to concentrate on some of those sectors.

Our space sector has trebled in size, and the jobs in it are highly skilled and highly productive. The Space Industry Act 2018 means that next-generation smaller, smarter satellites will not only be developed here but launched here. Space assets are key to our communications and our security. We are the only G7 country that

does not have its own earth imagery assets. We have paid for the Galileo satellites, and Britain needs to benefit from that.

We are a world leader in life sciences. We are home to the Wellcome Genome Campus. It was a British Prime Minister who led the visionary 100,000 Genomes Project, and it is absolutely right that life sciences are at the heart of the industrial sector. We need to ensure that drugs are not just delivered and developed here but used here, and our Select Committee has done some very good work on how we can ensure that those revolutionary genomic drugs get delivered into the NHS.

Data is the lifeblood of the digital revolution, and we cannot separate digital from other sectors of the economy. The scandal of Facebook and Cambridge Analytica reminds us of the need for clear rules. It is great that the general data protection regulation is becoming the global standard and that this Government are delivering it into British law through the Data Protection Bill. The strategy also points to the need for legislation to be flexible, which I welcome.

6.31 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I warmly welcome this debate and the Government's industrial strategy. It has been proved time and again that the best way to secure prosperity for millions of people around the world is through free enterprise and free markets, and that sits comfortably alongside the modern industrial strategy laid out by the Government. The challenges of globalisation affect us all, and taking a long-term view will tackle the underlying issues and enhance our economy more broadly.

I wish to focus my comments on my local area and a local approach. My constituency is on the outskirts of the country's second city, Birmingham. Birmingham is a large city that has suffered from a productivity gap with the rest of the country. It has overcome decades of bad press and has a legacy image problem. I bet that if I asked anyone in the Chamber—except the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey)—whether they have been to Birmingham, they would say that they have been for a meeting, been through it on the train or driven through Spaghetti Junction but they do not know much about Birmingham. It is a fabulous city, and I am proud of it. It is much better than Manchester, but this is not the time to go into that, because I want to talk about Redditch, which has its own challenges and has to carve out its own identity.

Redditch is on the outskirts of Birmingham. It is a new town, built to accommodate the overflow from Birmingham's factories. We have a proud history of manufacturing needles, fishing hooks and parts for military aircraft, which were important in our country's history. But what will the future hold for the people of Redditch? They wish to be proud of Redditch for what it can do in the future, not just what it has done in the past. That is why it is great to have a framework to tackle structural issues. It is not a world-class region like Oxford, Cambridge or London, so it needs some help to secure its future.

I would like to make some suggestions to the Secretary of State. If Grimsby can have a town deal, why can Redditch not? I have lobbied Treasury Ministers for that, and I would like to see that idea taken forward. We look close to home, to the Worcestershire town of

Kidderminster and its ambitious and successful ReWyre project led by Conservative councillors, and see no reason why we could not adopt a similar model to unlock the potential of Redditch.

I would like to see the devolution deal in the West Midlands combined authority unlock further potential in our region. It is successfully steered by a Conservative Mayor, and I believe that Redditch can harness that growth. I would also like to see a free enterprise zone or a free port, similar to what we see in Teesport. I understand that there is no reason why a landlocked area could not be a free port.

I will finish my remarks by focusing on skills, which are the single most important factor. We need to see reform of skills funding. The apprenticeship levy needs further reform, and we need further devolution and more freedom for those outside the traditional employment relationship to take charge of their own learning, to ensure lifelong learning for every person working in our country. Skills lie at the heart of the economic transformation needed in our area. They are a crucial aspect of rebalancing the economy and creating growth all around the country. To that end, I welcome the Government's focus in the industrial strategy on sector-specific deals and their commitment to listen to the full range of voices when developing local and sector-based deals so that firms of all sizes and sectors can buy into the strategy for years to come.

If people can live and work in Redditch, which has a great quality of life, environment and cultural offer, why would they move to the overcrowded and expensive south-east? Redditch is affordable and a clean, green town. We accept that people migrate around the country, but let us work towards the goal of enhancing all areas to make the best use of our country's natural talent and resources. I believe that the industrial strategy will achieve just that.

6.35 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I begin by referencing page 236 of the industrial strategy White Paper, which specifically mentions the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal. I look forward to hearing—shortly, I hope—about the heads of agreement that have been reached with the Scottish Government and local authorities so that the deal can be brought to life.

The subject is fascinating and I am sorry that there is so little time to talk about the industrial strategy. I want to concentrate on one aspect that I think is critical to its execution. We cannot overestimate the role of the UK universities sector in the successful execution of any industrial strategy worthy of the name. It remains a jewel in the UK's reputational crown. British universities are among the very best and people across the world aspire to attend them, such is the reputation of the quality of the education on offer.

Building close links between the universities and business is vital. Those links are the springboard for invention, innovation and new business creation. As a member of the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, I visited the University of Sheffield Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre, where the partnership between the university and Boeing has attracted the engagement of dozens of other business across the sector, solving problems and driving increases in productivity. That is a model for high-level collaboration

[Stephen Kerr]

between universities, academics and industry to enable the delivery of the industrial strategy. Sheffield has become a centre of excellence in design, machining, casting, welding, composites and so much more. It was inspiring to see how all that is being achieved. It gave a vision of what can be done when we put our minds to it.

We need to leverage the international excellence of UK universities to make the UK a global hub for ideation, invention, discovery, innovation and commercialisation.

Stirling University is the second largest employer in my constituency and we have welcomed some 2,600 overseas students who pay between £15,000 and £17,000 a year. Stirling University is therefore, to my mind, one of our great exporters. The Higher Education Policy Institute estimates that there is a £52 million net positive impact on Stirling from those students.

I recently visited the INTO international student facility at Stirling University where I met several of the international students. It came as no surprise to me that they had chosen to make Stirling their home because, 36 years ago, I did the same. However, I only came from Forfar, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who is not here, would doubtless attest, is still part of the United Kingdom.

We seem to make it too difficult for students to come here. We make people jump through hoops and undertake expensive and extensive screening and other requirements that very few other countries do. We are losing our market share in an expanding global market. The UK's reputation as a university destination choice is not what it should be. Chinese students are going to Canada, the United States and Australia rather than here. Those countries have targets to attract international students, and we can learn from that.

Time is against me. My appeal to the Government is: make it easier for students. It is time for students to be taken out of the Government's net immigration target. Student visas should be easier, not harder to obtain. We should build on the great strength of the UK universities sector as a path to executing the Government's industrial strategy.

6.39 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): I am glad of the opportunity to speak in this important debate. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who speaks for his area with characteristic vigour. It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who made the sterling point that the way in which to make sure our country develops economically is through private enterprise and free markets, and ensuring innovation in the private sector, which can create economic growth and jobs. We all want that and have seen it in the past eight years. We hope that that will continue to happen.

I also agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) that we should embrace change. We have an opportunity, over the next 10 to 20 years, to make our country into an even better place; to grow the jobs we know we can have and to develop the new skills and new industries we know are coming. We should embrace them rather

than be scared of them. What a contrast those fine speeches were compared to the dystopian and very unbalanced vision from the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) about how this country will fall away. I can see how that could happen only under a Labour Government.

I welcome the Government defining some of our key challenges over the next 10 to 20 years: growth, artificial intelligence, meeting the needs of an ageing population, and mobility. I want to focus on mobility. We have heard today about a potential sector deal for the rail industry, which I would welcome wholeheartedly. My area has an historic link to railways and rail manufacturing. My county is the home of Bombardier, although it is not in my particular constituency, which builds a significant number of trains around the country. What a difference the last few years have made, from a company in an industry that may have been struggling to having a really good order book that shows the renaissance of our railways. When I walk out from the station in my town tomorrow, I will see the statue of George Stephenson. He lived just a few miles away from my part of the world and it was his son who developed the Rocket. My part of the world is steeped in history.

When the Secretary of State considers a sector deal for the rail industry, which I endorse wholeheartedly and hope will come forward, I hope there is an opportunity for a cluster in the east midlands, just like the other clusters and sector deals we have talked about and the wonderful work going on in the automotive sector. There is an opportunity for the east midlands to build on Bombardier in Derby, build on the academy that has been put forward in Northampton, build on the news about additional train manufacturing in Lincolnshire and build on all the other opportunities we will have in the future. As part of the industrial strategy and the Government's mission to build on and improve economic growth and economic development, and the opportunities we have as a country, I hope we can have a sector deal for rail and a cluster that is supported in the fastest growing region outside London and the south-east, which is the east midlands.

6.42 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): This has been a timely, well-attended and generally well-informed debate. Members on both sides of the House have come together to call for an industrial strategy that brings good jobs to every region in our post-Brexit world. I listened with considerable respect to the contributions made by the hon. Members for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) and for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies), my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), the hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey), my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), the hon. Members for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack

Brereton), my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), and the hon. Members for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley).

Given the Secretary of State's predecessor's refusal to utter the words "industrial" and "strategy" in sequence, the current Secretary of State's rhetoric is to be welcomed. But it is just that: rhetoric from a Government forced to accept the reality facing working people. The White Paper, while lengthy—it was generously padded out to 256 pages with glossy pictures and large type—did little to turn that rhetoric into reality. To take just one example, my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State pointed out that the Government's target of spending 2.4% of GDP on research and development by 2027 is inadequate. By contrast, Labour would raise investment in R&D to 3% by 2030, ensuring that the UK has the greatest proportion of high-skilled jobs in the OECD as a consequence. My hon. Friends the Members for Aberavon and for Glasgow North East called for just such an economy.

The Government's strategy is not only under-resourced but sectoral, favouring sectors and areas that are already well organised and can push to the front of the queue. As Sheffield Hallam University researchers found last year, the Government's pledges would have an impact on only 10% of our manufacturing base and only 1% of the whole economy. Many Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for West Bromwich West and for Luton North, considered the implications of this disparity for their constituencies. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North implied, this is not so much about picking winners as rewarding those who have already won.

Let me take one example: Cambridge, a city that has contributed so much to the country's innovation economy. With a population of 285,000, it has as many private R&D jobs as the whole of the north, which has 50 times more people. This must not be an either/or. We need an industrial strategy that maintains our current centres of excellence, while ensuring that other areas can grow successful innovation-intensive economies as we move outside the European Union. Unlike the Government, we are not just focusing on headline-grabbing tech trends. We are committed to putting innovation at the heart of the lowest-paid and least productive sectors, for example by creating a retail catapult to support the 2.8 million people in our retail sector.

The Government's industrial strategy has no strategy to it and it has nothing to say about the fundamental workings of our economy. As the world-leading economist Mariana Mazzucato argues in her new book, "The Value of Everything", at the heart of capitalism's fundamental failure is the two faces of financialisation. The first is the way in which the financial sector has stopped resourcing the real economy. Instead of investing in companies that produce stuff, finance is financing finance. Why would someone lend money for a manufacturing plant that can take years to yield a return and cannot easily be sold on when they could bet on some options hedged with other options and virtually guarantee a return in a few weeks? With so much financial engineering demanding investment, real engineering does not stand a chance.

The second is the financialisation of the real economy. With industry driven by short-term returns, this results in less reinvestment of profits and rising burdens of debt, which in a vicious cycle makes industry even more driven by short-term considerations. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington emphasised, the sale of GKN to Melrose demonstrated that this Government are not prepared to step into defend our long-term economic industrial assets when they are under threat. Every time, short-term interest takes precedence.

We need a real industrial strategy that lays out a vision for the high-wage, high-skill, high-productivity economy that we want to build. As well as the two existing missions that my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State laid out earlier, our industrial strategy is based on a platform of strong horizontal policies—from our national education service making lifelong learning free at the point of use, to our £250 billion national transformation fund to deliver much-needed infrastructure improvements across our country and our diversity charter challenges to ensure that businesses draw on a wide range of talents.

Our approach is positive and practical. It speaks to the student who is anxious about their future, the single mum working two minimum wage jobs and the Redcar steelworker wanting a job to be proud of. It addresses the crisis in productivity, skills and wages that keeps us poorer, even with unemployment relatively low. The Secretary of State has already borrowed from our approach to an industrial strategy on more than one occasion—imitation is the sincerest form of flattery—and I urge him to do so again for the good of our economic future.

6.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): We have had a really excellent debate today, as I think all right hon. and hon. Member would agree. One of the most important challenges facing this or any Government is seeing that the industrial sector—basically our economy—can develop in partnership with the Government.

In my brief career as an A-level economics student in the late '70s, I visited a regional Neddy in Newcastle. We also went to London—it was the first time I had been to London, although not the last—to see how they worked. It seemed to me, at that time, to be civil servants and Ministers deciding which companies to pick. That is not what we are doing. This is a groundbreaking partnership involving the Government and industry working together. In my time at the Department, I have seen it involve hundreds of companies in a real way.

Norman Lamb: The Minister will be aware of the small business research initiative and the report, commissioned by the Government and prepared by David Connell, that was published last November. It is a really good report, but there has been no Government response. Will he or the Secretary of State be willing to meet me, in my role as Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, to discuss the report?

Richard Harrington: Both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I would be delighted to meet the right hon. Gentleman to discuss that important matter.

[Richard Harrington]

As I was saying, I have seen many companies involved in this industrial strategy. It is much more than the same few companies that are used to lobbying the Government from the centre. That is one of the great achievements. The shadow Secretary of State and shadow Minister made partisan speeches—the former rather more than the latter, I might say—and I could spend a long time rebutting them, but time does not allow. I must, however, respond to a few of their points. The shadow Secretary of State said there was no guidance for sector deals. It is all in the White Paper—there are six of them—and I am very happy to send her a copy. In fact, she can choose from one of the many languages that it is printed in. I will send her one of each.

The shadow Secretary of State said there was not enough research and development and that this was all hot air, but actually it lays a pathway for the biggest increase for 40 years. There is an extra £7 billion of research and development funding to 2022. After the 2.4% target, we are aiming for 3% and to be world class. She also mentioned, as did several of her colleagues, the issue of steel. We have had regular meetings with the managements of all the steel companies. I have visited two steel companies in the last week. Moreover, everyone in the Government, from the Prime Minister down, has been involved with the situation regarding President Trump and the United States. As for the sector deals, we are regularly talking about them with unions and companies alike. So this is not, as the hon. Lady said, gathering dust. It is very important to us. As for the local industrial strategy, it is really beginning to develop, and not just in three areas; it is being tested across places with different economies to see how it works.

We heard many other contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) represents a constituency that she is always fighting for, because she understands, as do her constituents, the need for skills and new technology and the need to drive down costs, which is key to the whole industrial strategy. I look forward to visiting her constituency tomorrow and on Friday.

I have a lot of respect for the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey). We have worked together in various capacities. We might have been on opposite sides of the table, but we have not always been in opposition to each other. He mentioned Jaguar Land Rover, as did the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), and the recent announcement not to renew the contracts of 1,000 temporary staff at Solihull. I spoke to the managing director of Jaguar Land Rover on Monday, and he made it clear that that decision has been taken to safeguard the competitiveness of the plants in the European market. The automotive industry is a very good example of how the industrial strategy works, and I know it has an extremely bright future.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I hope the hon. Gentleman will excuse me, but I do not have time to give way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) mentioned a town deal for Grimsby and

Cleethorpes, and I heard him speak very eloquently about it. There has been a meeting, and it is an absolute priority for us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) mentioned an aerospace growth partnership. This shows, as he knows, the benefits of a strategy that involves business and the Government working together. That is an intelligent way to channel money from business and from the Government together, which really summarises what the whole industrial strategy is about.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I am very sorry, but there is not time to give way.

Following an Adjournment debate held by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), I have met representatives of the ceramics industry and we are making progress—thanks to his efforts and those of other Members of Parliament, as well as the efforts of Laura Cohen and Kevin Oakes. We understand the ceramics business and we hope to be able to progress matters with them.

I thought at first that my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) was living in the 1840s, but the only person I know who does that is the Leader of the Opposition and he is not in the Chamber this afternoon. My hon. Friend showed us very eloquently that the lessons of the 1840s and the Government's responsibility to harness developing technology go absolutely to the centre of the industrial strategy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) talked about the skills gap in Wiltshire—another important aspect of the industrial strategy—and mentioned a retraining scheme, which is about people and places. My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) mentioned many sectors in Chelmsford. She showed that she had really read the industrial strategy and seen what it means in her constituency, and she is continuing to support it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) said that Birmingham is better than Manchester. I cannot comment on that, although I would say that neither of them is as good as Watford, but you would expect me to say that, Mr Speaker. Seriously, she continues to argue for a town deal for Redditch, and I am very happy to meet her to discuss the idea of a free port.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) is absolutely right to say that the University of Stirling is a jewel. Our universities are jewels, but the industrial strategy is helping them to work together with business and the commercial world, as I saw only two weeks ago when I helped to launch a new science hub at the University of Hertfordshire.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: As hon. Members will know, I usually do my absolute best to take interventions, but I cannot do so on this occasion.

The attitudes we have demonstrated are based on fact, not fantasy. This industrial strategy is absolutely real, as well as imaginative, rounded and ambitious. We have had such attitudes for centuries—this goes back to the point about 1841—but this is the way in which the

relationship between the Government and business will evolve. Those attitudes are a source of strength, just as our world-leading universities, businesses and workers are a source of strength. I believe that such attitudes are unique to the United Kingdom and, in combination, they are an asset that no other country can match in the same way.

The industrial strategy builds on our existing strengths and addresses any weaknesses. There is a wealth of potential in this country, and it is our duty to see it realised. It is my contention, and that of the Government, that our industrial strategy, which is available in as many languages as people want, will help this potential to be realised and will build an economy that is—I think this is the expression, which you may have heard before, Mr Speaker—fit for the future. I am very proud of it, and it is my job, and that of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, to see it delivered in the weeks, months and years to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Industrial Strategy.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We are coming to motion 5. Does the hon. Gentleman have to make his point of order now—if he does, I will hear it—or is he anticipating events?

Mr Bone: I am anticipating events. We will see what happens.

Mr Speaker: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman always has a keen sense of what is about to follow, which, colleagues—I merely remind you; you will be keenly aware of it—is motion 5. I call the Whip to move.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Not moved.

Mr Bone: I beg to move, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Well, the hon. Gentleman is a signatory to the motion and therefore he is entitled to move it.

SELECT COMMITTEE CHAIRS (TERM LIMITS)

Resolved,

That this House approves the Fourth Report of the Procedure Committee, Term limits for select committee chairs in the 2017 Parliament, HC 816; and accordingly that for the remainder of the present Parliament Standing Order No. 122A (Term limits for chairs of select committees) shall be read as if the word ‘ten’ were substituted for the word ‘eight’ in the text of that Order.—(*Mr Bone.*)

PETITION

Park Rangers in Wrexham County Borough Council

7 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I rise to present the petition of residents in Cefn Mawr in Clwyd South. First, let me say a special thank you to the tireless campaigners of Cefn branch Labour party, who have collected many signatures to save our wonderful park rangers service and protect the beautiful Ty Mawr country park.

The petition of residents of Cefn Mawr in Clwyd South,

Declares that nature parks are an important part of our environmental heritage; further that they provide an area in which residents and visitors can enjoy nature and open spaces and play a vital role in the conservation and protection of nature; and further that local country parks including Ty Mawr Country Park, Nant Mill Country Park and Alyn Waters Country Park are well used by the community and attract visitors to the area, therefore helping to support the local economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to urge Wrexham County Borough Council to reverse their decision to reduce funding for Park Rangers, whose role is vital to the continued existence of unspoilt country parks in Clwyd South constituency.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002133]

Thameslink Upgrades

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Kelly Tollhurst.)

7.2 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I thank the Minister for coming to the House to discuss this issue and for meeting me to discuss it previously. I also thank the Secretary of State for the numerous conversations about it that we have had in recent weeks. I have been forced to initiate this debate to ensure that Harpenden commuters get the good service that they deserve and pay good money for, rather than facing years of disruption and a worse service.

Lest I forget to mention the other half of my constituency, let me say at the outset that I am very aware of concern about the changes in the timetable for trains travelling from Hitchin station—in the north of my constituency—as well as those travelling from Harpenden. I will correspond with the Minister on that in due course and in further detail, but it will not constitute the main thrust of my remarks this evening.

I am sure that the desired outcome for Thameslink is, eventually, a greatly improved service throughout the network, but the immediate negative impact on commuters in Harpenden for the next two years is unacceptable to my constituents and to me. The key issue is a loss of services during peak morning and evening hours. Thameslink deems the peak morning period to be between 7 am and 9.59 am, which has led to much disagreement between Harpenden commuters—and myself—and the operator. Regardless of what Thameslink calls the “peak”, most commuters from Harpenden travel to work between the hours of 6.30 am and 8.30 am, and between these times Harpenden will see a net loss in service of two fast trains. These fast trains are only partly compensated for by lengthening some trains from eight to 12 carriages, and Thameslink putting on extra trains after 9 am to meet its peak-time requirements is not going to help anybody trying to get to work on time in London. In practical terms, the overall loss is eight carriages in that key two-hour slot, which represents a loss of capacity for over 1,100 people, who will mostly have to stand.

Not only is the current demand from Harpenden station to London extremely high, but in addition there will be an increased number of passengers on the train before it gets to Harpenden station, as East Midlands Trains is reducing the number of trains stopping at Bedford, so many thousands of effectively new commuters will also be using these services. To sum up, Harpenden is getting a reduction in service and an increase in passengers—and I am not even getting into the general growth of Harpenden as a town over the next couple of years—making the commute not merely inconvenient but, for many, unbearable.

Let us compare this situation with that for St Albans, a town not far from Harpenden. Commuters from St Albans will be gaining fast trains during peak hours, as well as slow trains, and a net increase of 44 carriages. To put that in context, that is six times the number that Harpenden is losing. I am fully aware that St Albans has approximately double the footfall of Harpenden, but it would be clear to any objective observer that a considered approach by Thameslink and Network Rail should not lead to such a discrepancy.

I am a realist—as you know, Mr Deputy Speaker; you know me—and I recognise that changes will always need to be made to train timetables, but consultation for changes is, and should always be, key, not just because people deserve the chance to have their say on changes that can significantly affect their working lives and their lives more generally, but because it gives a chance to inform local people how proposed changes can be improved for all concerned.

There was an embarrassing lack of consultation on these changes. The Minister has admitted that there was never going to be a consultation because it would be “disingenuous” to consult as there were no “genuine options”. That is not good enough for a timetable change of this scale. I have had several meetings over the past few weeks with experts on these matters, with expertise from the technical—it took me a while to understand what they were talking about, but I got there—to the bureaucratic and organisational. Some of those experts live in Harpenden but others live outside. They said to me that alternative choices could have been made that impact on Harpenden, and the entire line more broadly, much less and much more evenly.

In addition to hearing the Minister’s response on the lack of consultation, I would like to know what measures Thameslink intends to take to monitor the impact of the timetable changes that will be introduced in May over the coming months, to reassess them in the autumn and offer a clear timescale on when customers can finally expect to see improvements. What commitment is there to listen to and, more importantly, act on feedback from customers following the introduction of the proposed timetable changes?

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He will understand that the changes for his commuters from Harpenden and mine from Luton are a direct result of East Midlands trains being taken out in the peak in the mornings and the running of fast services to replace that. He is right to say that speed is of the essence, and making sure this situation is not prolonged for three years or so is something on which the Minister should focus.

Bim Afolami: The hon. Gentleman is well informed on these issues and is generally well informed when he speaks in the House. The focus of my remarks is Harpenden, but I agree that this affects many colleagues on both sides of the House, and I urge the Minister to bear all these specific concerns in mind.

It is a term of the franchise agreement between Thameslink and the Department for Transport that if there is a “material adverse impact” on passengers because of changes, there must be a 12-week consultation period. Before the debate, I asked the Minister and the Secretary of State several times whether they agreed that these changes did in fact represent a material adverse impact. I also asked them how, if they disagreed, they would characterise the changes.

I want to make this point clear to the House. The impact of these timetable changes goes beyond just changing what time people arrive at work or at home. A key issue that has been raised with me time and again is the impact on working parents, especially working mothers. Working parents have particularly tight windows for

getting into work and getting home. I know, as the parent to two small boys, Zach and Sam, and as the husband of a working mother, that organising childcare around a commute is a hugely important factor in any working parent's day. It is therefore unacceptable for Thameslink's changes to cause so much disruption to so many people.

Let me describe the impact of these changes on my constituents. I shall use as examples two people who have emailed me about this matter. The first constituent states:

"I am a mother of three school age children and am recovering from breast cancer. In the recent months, I have chosen to catch a semi fast service, 0718, to be able to get a seat to minimise the stress and impact on my health. This service will no longer stop at Harpenden. I will have to catch an earlier train on which there is unlikely to be seats due both to the reduction in trains and the fact that Thameslink will have thousands of extra customers a day due to East Midland Trains reducing the services stopping at Bedford and Luton. I am concerned about the impact on my health, my ability to get to work on time and on the time I can spend with my children."

The second constituent has said:

"I fear for my wife who has to drop our son at nursery at 0730 and therefore has no option but to travel at an already busy time. I can't see anything other than a negative impact for her on what is already a far from ideal journey given the current numbers of people using those services, lack of space and seats. The return journey may be considerably worse than today and the reduction in services could potentially make it difficult to get back to the nursery on time, particularly when there are problems with track or trains."

Those are just two examples, but similar concerns have been repeated again and again by worried parents and by people across Harpenden of all ages and circumstances who commute to London for work.

I accept—and I am sure the Minister will agree—that dealing with Britain's train network is a real challenge for the Department, for Network Rail and for the Ministers and senior civil servants involved. Overcrowding on the network is nothing new, with rail passenger journeys more than doubling in the past 20 years. St Pancras is a key destination for Harpenden commuters, and at that station alone, more than 36,000 passengers arrive during the morning peak, with another 30,000 going to Blackfriars station, which has the worst overcrowding in London. Passenger numbers on the trains from Harpenden have grown year on year, with the service now bursting at the seams, as any Harpenden commuter who gets on the train at peak time will tell us.

The use of Thameslink has grown faster than was expected when the programme began. The predicted yearly increase in passenger numbers was between 0.5% and 1% over the lifetime of the Thameslink programme. However, Thameslink now carries 40% more passengers than it did seven years ago. The Public Accounts Committee, of which I am a proud member, has reported on Thameslink's problems and recently found that the knock-on effect of issues along the entire Thameslink network means that the number of trains reaching their destination within five minutes of their scheduled time has fallen from 91.4% to 83%.

It is important to make the point that the growth in passenger numbers is an indication of the success of the service. Harpenden would not be such a desirable place to live if the service was not, broadly speaking, a good one. However, with that passenger growth comes the

immense challenge of managing it appropriately and keeping costs down for passengers, and I am afraid that Thameslink appears to be failing on both counts.

Bearing in mind the extent of overcrowding and the increasingly stretched service that I have described, Harpenden commuters into London currently pay just over £3,800 a year for an annual ticket, and well over £4,000 if a tube travelcard is included, which most commuters need. By comparison, a season ticket from Woking—I have nothing against Woking; they are very nice people—which is a similar distance from London, is £400 cheaper. Basildon—again, a wonderful place with nice people—to London is £1,000 cheaper for a similar distance. My point is that Harpenden commuters are paying their fair share. They are travelling the same distance for more money and face a real disruption to services without any compensation.

All the issues—the timetable changes, delayed services and overcrowding—have caused huge concern for my constituents and have resulted in me raising questions repeatedly with both the Secretary of State and the Minister. In respect of the upcoming changes, due to come into force on 21 May after at least two years, there are some key questions that need to be addressed that have so far gone unanswered.

First, when was the decision made to make changes to East Midlands trains that would impact Harpenden? At what stage were changes to Harpenden's services considered and decided upon? Secondly, will the Minister explain why Harpenden is experiencing a loss in services during peak morning and evening times, while St Albans, as I have described, is experiencing a big increase, especially considering the increased footfall from Bedford through Harpenden?

Thirdly, given the increase in passenger numbers combined with a reduction in frequency and capacity of service, what will be the impact on Harpenden commuters of Bedford passengers travelling on Thameslink services during peak times? How many more passengers will be on the London trains arriving in Harpenden in the morning as a result of the timetable changes?

Fourthly, by Govia Thameslink Railway's own admittance, some of the proposed improvements that will come into effect at the end of 2018 are at the mercy of engineering works further down the line in Kent. What is the risk realistically that those works will not be completed in time, therefore extending even further the problems that Harpenden commuters are facing? Fifthly, there is huge concern about the lack of consultation with local people, despite the material adverse impact to services of timetable changes. To add insult to injury, Thameslink still claims that the service will not be significantly impacted. Does the Minister agree that there will be a material adverse change and that there should have been a consultation? If he does not, how does he view the changes? Finally, and most importantly, when will Harpenden commuters get the service they deserve and have been promised for so long?

I have not come to the Chamber just to complain. There are proposed solutions available that could be implemented as soon as May, despite the insistence from senior officials at GTR that they are not workable. I put several suggestions to GTR officials when we met a few weeks ago, yet there has been no consultation to discuss the alternatives. One suggestion is that five trains from Bedford to London should stop at Harpenden

[Bim Afolami]

in addition to stopping at St Albans, which would add between three and four minutes to the journey. I understand that there are complexities in getting all the trains to London at a reasonable time, bearing in mind the extra three or four minutes, but the experts to whom I have spoken do not believe that they are insurmountable. Another simpler solution that would increase capacity, although it would not solve the issue of train frequency, would be for the Minister to declassify all first-class carriages during peak times. That would give some much-needed relief to passengers on what will be an increasingly overcrowded service.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the Harpenden Thameslink Commuters Group, notably Emily Ketchin, for its tireless campaigning and lobbying. Harpenden councillors have not been far behind, particularly Mary Maynard and Teresa Heritage, and I thank them for helping me to understand how much the changes have affected Harpenden residents.

There will be those, not in this Chamber now but outside, who do not think timetable changes or impacts on commuters are really that important, but I believe that that is of critical importance, and not just to the individual passengers, as I have set out. If we want to keep London and the south-east as the most dynamic regional economy in Europe, people need to be able to get to work on time, not packed like cattle, at a reasonable price. Importantly, when major changes are made to their service—such changes must happen from time to time—passengers should be consulted and treated like adults and paying customers.

I know that the Minister wants to do his best for Harpenden commuters. I also know that he is a highly intelligent and thoughtful man, as the whole House will appreciate. I ask him to consider carefully the concerns of Harpenden commuters that I have expressed in this debate, to give them hope that the future will be better with an improved, not reduced, service, and to strengthen their damaged faith in our rail transport network.

7.20 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on securing this debate, which follows on from our conversations in meetings we held on 22 March.

I begin with the specific issue of the changes to the timetable. Harpenden is on the midland main line, which runs from London to Nottingham and Sheffield and, as Members know, is undergoing its largest upgrade since it was built in the 19th century. The upgrade is necessary and urgent, as the number of passenger journeys taken on Britain's rail network has doubled in the past 20 years. As part of the upgrade, a fourth track is being built north of Bedford to Kettering and will provide space for an additional train path from December 2020. Unfortunately, to allow the works to take place, some difficult decisions have had to be taken.

East Midlands Trains fast peak-time services will not call at Bedford or Luton from May 2018 to December 2020. Instead, displaced East Midlands Trains passengers from Bedford and Luton will be able to travel on fast Thameslink services, which will not stop at Harpenden.

In answer to my hon. Friend's first question, the decision was made in November 2017, once the industry had exhausted all alternative options.

Obviously, I completely understand the concerns of commuters from my hon. Friend's constituency. However, steps have been taken so that, despite the unavoidable loss of two fast peak services, overall the capacity from Harpenden in the morning will be roughly the same as today, with only four fewer carriages across the entire three-hour morning peak. There will be an increase in capacity during the evening peak, with an additional 20 carriages bringing an additional 1,242 seats. In addition, it is expected that most Bedford commuters will opt to take the fast Thameslink services, rather than those that stop at Harpenden. It is possible that that will reduce, rather than increase, crowding on Harpenden services.

My hon. Friend raises the issue of St Albans City station, which requires a capacity increase because, as he acknowledges, it carries twice as many passengers as Harpenden and already has issues of its own with crowding on platforms. On the potential for engineering works in Kent to delay the improvements to Harpenden, these are minor works and are currently on schedule to be completed on time. There is minimal risk to passengers from Harpenden.

From December 2018, an additional service will be scheduled in both the morning and evening peaks, and two trains will be lengthened from eight to 12 carriages. That will provide a capacity increase in both peaks. From December 2020, when the upgrade to the midland main line is complete, Thameslink will reinstate the fast services that have been withdrawn and will add four more 12-car peak services at Harpenden, resulting in an additional two fast 12-car trains per hour compared with the May timetable. That will provide a substantially improved service for Harpenden commuters.

I apologise again to my hon. Friend as the full benefits of the Thameslink programme will be delayed for commuters from his constituency. In the context of the major engineering works necessary to bring the midland main line into the 21st century, this was the best available solution. We should also not lose sight of the many benefits the Thameslink programme will bring to passengers from Harpenden and the wider Thameslink network: new trains; more reliable journeys; and a substantial increase in capacity from 2020.

My hon. Friend mentioned the problems with consultation, which, again, we have discussed extensively in our previous meetings. I would like to emphasise that ahead of this timetable change Thameslink has carried out one of the largest and, in some ways, most effective consultations we have ever seen on the railways. In fact, as a result of these consultations, Thameslink has made hundreds of changes to its plans.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): May I endorse what the Minister has just said, in that we see a net benefit in my constituency from the changes to the timetable and I have encountered constituents who are very impressed with changes that have been made as a result of the consultation? However, like my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), one station, in particular, in my constituency is losing services during that critical peak time, when people need to get into London to work. In addition to dealing with the questions he has been asked, will the Minister assure the House

that this issue will continue to be kept under review and we will be able to look at it again when we see the full import of the timetable and its impact on our commuters?

Joseph Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing to our attention the issues faced by his constituents, particularly at Balcombe station. There will be further opportunities to lobby for changes to the timetable at the next iteration; May's is obviously set in stone, but there will always be a December timetable and subsequent timetables, so these things are not set in stone. This has been one of the biggest timetabling changes the network has ever seen and, understandably, not everything is going to satisfy everybody at every moment in time.

Mr Shuker: I am extremely grateful to hear that from the Minister. Of course, it is a rolling series of timetable changes over the next three years, at six-monthly intervals. Members in this House will be extremely grateful to hear the Minister's willingness to keep a close eye on things at each of those timetable changes, rather than necessarily relying on the plan as it currently stands to go for two and a half years.

Joseph Johnson: This has been one of the biggest timetabling changes the system has ever undertaken, and as I have said, it will not have satisfied everybody in its first iteration. However, December is coming along in not too lengthy a period of time, and hon. Members are always welcome to put suggestions to the Department and to their operators for consideration.

¹The impact of the midland main line works only became apparent to us in November 2017, as I mentioned. This short timeline meant that a specific consultation for Harpenden passengers was simply not a viable option. To give my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden some background, the detailed work to implement the May timetable on the Thameslink routes began more than a year ago. This timetable rewrite is unprecedented in its scale. Every service on this part of the network is being altered to bring about the full

benefits of the Thameslink programme. As work progressed, the Department was advised that there were likely to be some temporary negative impacts on some services as a result of the complexity of this undertaking. By the time this became clear, it would have been disingenuous to consult, as he acknowledged, as there was by that stage only one viable option before us. Since that point, industry professionals have been working to address as many of these negative effects as physically possible. Although it has not been possible to eliminate them all, the industry will continue to work to improve the timetable at every subsequent opportunity.

As an MP whose constituency sits on the Thameslink network, I share many of the concerns that have been raised in this debate. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that the Thameslink programme is an incredibly ambitious investment, which will transform travel across the south-east for the coming decades. We have already seen new trains rolled out across the Thameslink network, replacing trains that were first introduced in the 1980s. The new trains carry far more people and will allow Thameslink to meet the demand of a 21st-century city. These trains have live information screens so that passengers know if their tube line is delayed. These trains have wide entrances and gangways, making it easier for passengers to move around and get on and off the train. We have also already seen substantial investment in stations. The £1 billion redevelopment of London Bridge is perhaps the best known, but investments have been made across the network so that the benefits of the Thameslink programme can be felt across the whole south-east. We have also seen substantial investment in infrastructure upgrades, including the replacement of tracks and signals and the repair of tunnels and bridges. This means that passengers will get the resilient and reliable service that they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 18 April 2018

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

Council of Europe

9.30 am

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the work of the Council of Europe.

It is a great pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hosie, for this important debate. I thank the Minister, who I know is very interested in this work, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood). I also thank all the members of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe, some of whom have worked there for decades—I have worked for just months, so I defer to their knowledge and expertise in this area. I pay special tribute to the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), who has been an excellent leader of the delegation and has been very helpful to us all, as has my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), who leads the Labour delegation. Much of that work goes unrecognised.

All the parties in this House are represented in the Council of Europe, and the way we try to work together is a great tribute to us all. We do that because we know the importance of the Council of Europe. I was interested in introducing this morning's debate because I have been in this House for 20 years and, to be frank, before that my understanding of the work of the Council of Europe was limited. The British public's understanding of it is probably even more limited, which is no criticism of them. We all need to think about how we can raise the profile, not only in this country but across Europe, of the important work that the Council of Europe does. That is the purpose of today's debate.

The Council of Europe calls itself the democratic conscience of greater Europe, which I think is true. I am not a cynical person—cynicism is the great enemy of politics today. That statement is a fundamental aim of the Council of Europe. Let us be clear: this is not about the UK saying that we have everything right, and that we will tell the rest of Europe and the world what to do. We have our own challenges, as we can see from some of today's newspaper headlines regarding anti-Semitism and the Windrush generation.

Let us reflect on Winston Churchill, Clement Attlee and the great leaders of the past who set up the Council of Europe in the aftermath of the destruction and terror of world war two. Make no mistake: I am not comparing the situation today to world war two. However, I strongly believe that if Winston Churchill or Clement Attlee were alive today and could see what is happening across Europe, they would think, "Goodness me, there is still a long way to go, even some decades after we proposed the establishment of a council of Europe that would work towards the establishment of democracy, the rule of law, freedom of expression and tolerance across our continent, as well as the rest of the world." That is why it is so important.

Sometimes such rhetoric—stating and restating the principles in which we believe—is seen as remote, and not dealing with the practical realities of the modern world. I say that we should never take for granted the way in which the Council of Europe stands up for and speaks out on the principles on which democratic societies must be based, which it does exceedingly well.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday I wrote to the Foreign Secretary about the proposed Polish holocaust law, which revises history and is clearly anti-Semitic. Does my hon. Friend agree that it needs to be raised in the Council of Europe with the Polish Government, as do the issues with the Hungarian Government regarding anti-Semitic tropes in the recent election?

Vernon Coaker: My hon. Friend makes a good point. He is absolutely right about those issues in Poland and Hungary, but there are numerous other areas in which the Council of Europe continues to stand up and speak out. We should not shy away from that, which is why the statement that the Council of Europe acts as the democratic conscience of Europe is important. When the Council of Europe was established by Churchill and others with great words, they believed that within 20 or 30 years some of those problems could be defeated. Yet my hon. Friend reminds us of something that all of us who participate in such debates, both here and abroad, know: battles that we thought would be won are having to be refought. Things that we thought would be taken for granted are having to be fought for again.

Some of this is difficult, and there is so much to discuss. The Minister gave us an exposition of his efforts with Turkey. We in the Council of Europe would think that much of what happens in Turkey is not right, but what did the Minister do? He did not shy away from it. He went there, talked to them, and tried to say, "You are a democracy and part of NATO, and you were talking about becoming a member of the EU. We know that there are difficulties, but you cannot fight what you regard as terrorism or prejudice by resorting to measures that we regard as authoritarian and anti-democratic." Such measures, however, do not mean that we turn our back on those countries. The Minister was absolutely right to remind us about how he went to speak in Istanbul—he will correct me if I am wrong—straight after the attempted coup, not to support the Turkish Government but to say to them, "Look, you may deal with these things, but you need to deal with them in a democratic way that adheres to the principles we all share." That is exceedingly important.

As a body, we are looking at and dealing with many issues of real difficulty. I cannot believe that in 2018 I am speaking in this Chamber about how it is still important for the Council of Europe, which may become particularly important post-Brexit as an inter-parliamentary assembly where we can come together, to stand up for democracy and freedom under the law. From research by Amnesty International, we can see how in individual countries across Europe political sanctions are being introduced, people are being imprisoned for what they say, and people are being denied freedom of expression, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, and gender equality. I am not saying that we all ought to live a life of gloom and pessimism, but part of the role of the Council of Europe is to talk to those countries and stand up for the principles that we hold dear.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and agree with everything he has said. Does he agree that one good way to raise the profile of the 36 Members of this House and the other place who go to the Council of Europe would be, at the very minimum, an annual debate on the Floor of the House and in Government time to showcase what we are doing as a nation, among the very large number of nations that make up the Council of Europe and its observers?

Vernon Coaker: I could not agree more. The right hon. Lady makes an excellent suggestion. I hope that the Minister can take the idea back and talk to his Whips Office—I am sure that ours will also be agreeable to that. We should all continue to think what more we can do in this country and across Europe to reflect the importance of the work being done. For example, the Minister might like to make a statement to the House after the annual meeting of the Committee of Ministers. I am sure that he would enjoy that.

The truth is that this is important work. To give an example, one of the challenges of our time is the migrant and refugee crisis. Whatever our view on its causes, who is to blame and so on, the Council of Europe reminds us that in the end we are talking about people, in particular children, and that whatever the rights and wrongs of individual foreign policy decisions, it cannot be right that tens of thousands of unaccompanied children are struggling across Europe, often with no prospect of being resettled or relocated.

I went to Jordan recently as part of the Council of Europe delegation. What a phenomenal example Jordan is to the rest of the world in the way it tries to deal with refugee and migrant problems. It is a country of 10 million people. It is not one of the poorest countries in the world, but it is not one of the richest either. Two million of those people are migrants or refugees. I went to the Zaatari refugee camp on the Jordanian-Syrian border, where there are 80,000 people. Hundreds of thousands have been through that camp, which was established in 2012. It is now a small town, as the Minister will know, as I think he has been there as well. The Jordanian people are an example to the rest of us in the way that they have supported the needs of the people in that camp and the rest of the country, and helped them to integrate into their society. They are a reminder and a wake-up call to us all to see children as children, with rights, who need others to speak up for them. It is not their fault that they are fleeing war, that they are unaccompanied or that they do not know where they are going to go. Surely, as the Council of Europe has reminded us time and again, we have a responsibility to stand up, work with them and do what we can.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a characteristically powerful speech. He and I are both members of the Council of Europe's Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, and there is no better example of why the Council of Europe is about not just the history of our relationship with Europe, but its future. It behoves every nation to address these challenges. Only by being able to talk to our colleagues in other countries will we ever be able to find solutions. What the Council of Europe and that Committee allows us to do is start that process.

Vernon Coaker: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend has been one of the Members of this House at the forefront of championing the rights of children. That is one example of what the Council of Europe seeks to do. Helped by the hon. Member for North Thanet, I have put down my own resolution on trafficking and slavery, which we hope will help us to make progress.

Is it not also great that we have a body in Europe that has many of the former countries of the Soviet Union as members? We talk to and discuss with them and they are part of a democratic process. There are still issues in some of those countries—I know Members will have been to some, observed elections and seen some of the problems—but we are trying to help and support them and build their democracy. It is just not possible to expect a country that has no democratic traditions or history of inclusion and tolerance, and that still has ethnic clashes, suddenly to pass a constitution and the next day become a beacon of democracy for the world. That is not the real world. The important point is that those countries need help, support and challenge and the Council of Europe can provide that.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Talking of countries of the former Soviet Union that have problems with democracy, one must not forget Russia. Does the hon. Gentleman share my view that jaw-jaw is better than war-war, and that one of the advantages of bringing Russia back into the Council of Europe, however much we disagree with its present Government, is that we could at least engage them in some way and perhaps encourage them into better behaviour?

Vernon Coaker: I think that it is really important that the Council of Europe has standards and says that it will not compromise on its principles. I also believe that it is extremely important to continue to talk and discuss with people. I agree absolutely with that, but not with saying, "We will not worry about that, on the basis that we want to keep talking to you." We have to be tough and say, "This is what we believe," but that does not mean it is impossible for us to continue to have dialogue with people even if we do not agree with them. That is what I think about Russia.

It is astonishing that even in Europe—this continent that holds itself up as an example to the rest of the world—there are still examples where we have to defend the principle of freedom of expression. It is astonishing that in some countries in Europe journalists have been imprisoned simply for criticising the Government of the day. It is hard to believe. When the Council of Europe was set up in 1949, would those who went to its first meeting believe that we would be here in 2018 and that there would still be people locked up for what they say or write? I do not believe that they would have. The Council of Europe says to the Governments of its member states that they cannot lock people up simply because they criticise a Government, however much they disagree with what has been written or said. It is a fundamental principle that people can organise, write and demonstrate peacefully for something they believe in. Here again, the Council of Europe is standing up and demanding that.

I do not want to speak for too long, because I know that others want to contribute, but I have a couple of further remarks to make. The challenges that the Council

of Europe has faced and is facing should not hide its achievements. Sometimes it is criticised for being a talking shop. There is a lot to be said for talking shops. Where else would we bring that collection of countries together and force them to listen to opinions that they might not agree with?

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I apologise for my late arrival to the debate—I was detained by a constituency issue. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and making such a powerful speech. I am a very new member of the Council of Europe, so it is fantastic to hear. Does he agree that, given the current geopolitical situation and what we are facing in Syria, talking is one of the most important tools in our armoury?

Vernon Coaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her apology—of course that is fine. I agree that it is about talking, but the Council of Europe also tries to help us understand. Ignorance is not bliss, and in order to solve the problems facing Europe and the world we have to try to understand what is going on. That does not mean that we abandon our principles; it means that we have to try to understand why people are doing what they are doing. I agree with her that that is really important.

The Council of Europe has helped to establish democracy and certain other principles. We should celebrate the fact that it is now a “death penalty-free zone”, as it puts it, which is of huge significance. One of the Council of Europe’s great achievements is the European convention on human rights and the establishment of the European Court of Human Rights. It is important for the country to recognise that, although we are leaving the EU, the European Court of Human Rights is not part of the EU. When we look at some of the cases that have been heard at the European Court of Human Rights, even those relating to our country, we see a body standing up for the universality of a principle and holding even Governments to account. That is not necessarily the most popular thing to say, but I fundamentally believe it. I make that argument in my constituency and tell people that we should celebrate the fact that we have human rights and bodies that stand up for them; we should not abhor them or use populist rhetoric.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As I discussed with the previous Lord Chancellor, we have a magnificent success record at the European Court of Human Rights. Well over 90% of our cases are dropped or turned away. We should celebrate that to ensure that the ECHR is not seen as vehicle for attack by organisations such as the *Daily Mail*.

Vernon Coaker: I agree. The hon. Gentleman will remember that it was the European Court of Human Rights that ensured that thalidomide victims got the justice they deserved.

Whether it is ending the death penalty, fighting for freedom of expression, strengthening human rights, tackling discrimination, standing up for refugees and migrants, campaigning for and championing gender equality, introducing new laws and conventions, or acting as a forum for debating difficult and controversial issues, we can all be proud of the Council of Europe. I have talked about the challenges that we face in Europe

today, but let us remember the challenges that those who established the Council of Europe faced in 1949. We do not face the same challenges, but let us not be cynical. Let us be hopeful and optimistic. Let us believe that by talking to and challenging other countries in the environment that the Council of Europe offers us, we can make progress. In the end, ordinary people’s common decency and desire to achieve what they can for themselves, their families and their countries will move them to believe it is possible to overcome the racism, intolerance and discrimination that still scar our continent today. It is possible to do better. The Council of Europe gives us a real opportunity to make that more of a reality than it is.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Ten Back Benchers wish to speak and we have 35 minutes. If they take three and a half minutes each, they will all get in; if they do not, some will not.

9.54 am

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I will do my best, Mr Hosie, but I may take a little longer than three and a half minutes.

I congratulate my friend, the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), on securing this debate, on his robust presentation and on his kind personal remarks. He said that we work together, and indeed we do. In that context, I thank the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), the leader of the Labour group, and the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), the leader of the Scottish National party group, for their unqualified support for the work we all try to do. We are collegiate, we work together and we bat for Britain: this is team UK. It is our collective and proud boast that we do not allow our domestic party political differences to interfere with the work we try to do on behalf of the country within the Council of Europe.

I also thank, because they are not present, the Members of the other House, who make a significant contribution to the work of the Parliamentary Assembly as part of our team. I would be failing in my duty if I did not put on the record our collective appreciation for the tireless work of our ambassador, Christopher Yvon, and his team from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Strasbourg. Their wisdom and support is absolutely invaluable.

Finally on the list of thank yous, and on a purely personal note, during my brief time as the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, under rather bizarre circumstances, I was fortunate enough to have the service of Mark Neville, the chef de cabinet in the President’s office, and his team. Again, the support they offered was superb.

The difference between the UK delegation and some others is that we are not mandated. In the Parliamentary Assembly, we see people rushing out and telephoning ambassadors, Foreign Secretaries and others to take instructions about how to vote. That is not true of this delegation. We make up our own minds and try to work together. We do not always agree—you will find out in a moment, Mr Hosie, that my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and I have a

[Sir Roger Gale]

slightly different opinion about Russia—but part of the principle of British parliamentary democracy is that we have the right to disagree with each other and still respect our friends, and we do. For that we should all be grateful.

When I joined the Parliamentary Assembly for the first time in 1987, there were some 20 members. When Winston Churchill and Jean Monnet founded it in 1947, there were only 12 members. There are now 47 member states. The Council of Europe territory stretches from Azerbaijan to Spain, and from the northern shores of the Mediterranean to Iceland. It has as observers Canada, Japan, the United States, and the Holy See and Algeria, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Tunisia and the Palestinian Legislative Council are partners for democracy—a status introduced in 2009.

The Council covers a population of some 820 million people. It is consistently confused and conflated with the European Union, which in some quarters does us no favours whatever. The European flag was created by the Council of Europe in 1955 and borrowed by the European Union subsequently—as was the “Ode to Joy”, the European anthem. For all that, as my hon. Friend for Gedling said, and I say that advisedly, there is no other organisation in the world that deals in the way the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly do—the Council is made up of the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly—with torture, racism and the trafficking of human beings. He mentioned, absolutely correctly, the need to give children a voice and protect them from sexual abuse. The Council of Europe tries to do that. It deals with violence against women, the rights of minorities within countries, and the freedom of the press, which at the moment is very significant indeed in the context of countries such as Turkey, where I fear a significant number of journalists languish in prison as political prisoners.

Of course, we should not forget that the Council also deals with election observation. It provides election observation missions to very many countries, to seek to underpin democracy and to ensure that proper democratic processes are followed and that elections are free and fair.

The hon. Member for Gedling said that sometimes we are referred to as a talking shop. That is true; unfortunately, the popular press also describes us as a dining club. In fact, a great deal of work is done by all colleagues present. In my opening remarks, I omitted to thank the leader of the European Conservatives group, my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger). I would hate for him to go away and sulk, and think that his work was not appreciated, because it is.

The Council of Europe embraces the European Court of Human Rights, which was mentioned. That is a very significant part of our work. I would like to be able to say that everything in the garden is rosy, but it is not. We face a very difficult situation, particularly with the Russian Federation following the invasion and annexation of Crimea and the Federation's interference in the business of the Donbass, in eastern Ukraine. The Parliamentary Assembly invoked sanctions against the Russian Federation and took away its voting rights. Some will say that it has been suspended from the Council of Europe—that is

incorrect. The Russian Federation walked out and has chosen not to present its credentials for the last two years.

Worse than that, we are now being subjected to economic blackmail: the Federation has failed to pay some €20 million that are due to the Parliamentary Assembly. That is designed to impact upon our work. The Federation's line is, “You give us back our voting rights and we'll come back and pay.” The Council of Europe is not for sale. The Parliamentary Assembly is not for sale to anybody at any price. That message needs to go out very clearly to the Russian Federation. Yes, if it recognises the transgressions in Crimea, in the Donbass and in the support for the use of chemical warfare both in this country and in Syria, it will be welcomed back. Of course, we need to keep talking—those talks go on behind the scenes.

The world has to understand that there is no place for any country, around the table in the Hemicycle of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, that is not prepared to abide by the terms and conditions laid down. We are a rules-based international organisation and we abide by those rules. That message has to go out very clearly indeed. We shall emerge from this process stronger, better organised, leaner and possibly hungrier, but able to play our part in the developing world.

The point has been made but I will make it again: post-Brexit, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Ministerial Committee will be the voice of Britain in wider Europe. It is an important platform now; it will become a much more important platform in future.

10.3 am

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to speak in this very important debate. I, too, want to start by paying tribute to the fact that we all work together so very well. It is a real privilege to be part of a UK delegation that has agreed jointly to sponsor an exhibition at next week's Assembly to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) for his amazing work and how he has worked with me and all of us to make sure that the exhibition goes ahead. I am very proud of that piece of work.

There was a practical example of how we all work together at the Assembly in January, when a monitoring report on Bosnia and Herzegovina was very critical of Serbian activity in Bosnia. There was an attempt by Serbian representatives from Bosnia at the Assembly to weaken the report. It was the strength of the UK delegation voting as one that helped to defeat those amendments. That avoided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe—the fact that we can work together and send out those very powerful messages to member states. The Council of Europe is not just a talking shop—if it is a talking shop, it is a very important one that is capable of sending out the most profound and fundamental of messages across the continent.

I want to echo all the thanks that have been given so far, but I also want to draw attention to the staff who work in the Council of Europe office here in Parliament.

They do a fantastic job. Jonathan Finlay in particular has dedicated a great deal of time to putting together the exhibition that we will all enjoy, I hope, next week in Strasbourg. I echo entirely the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker)—or is it right honourable?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): He's getting there!

Angela Smith: He is getting there. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, which we are all very pleased to participate in. I will not repeat his comments about the history that led to the foundation of the Council of Europe in 1949, but I do want to say that the Council has certainly played a vital role in defending democracy, human rights and the rule of law since that time. I absolutely echo his comments that it is important at this stage, when we are at a crossroads and face potentially fundamental changes in Europe, that we do not take for granted the values that underpin the Council of Europe. I am concerned about that. It is all too easy to take those values as given, but we must continue to defend them.

We have heard a lot today about the rights of minorities and the need to tackle the problem of political prisoners, LGBT rights, women's rights, refugees and children. We also need to remember the rights of lawyers—I mention that because I am sitting next to one—to defend their clients effectively, because they are really important, especially when it comes to freedom of expression and dealing with the problems relating to the states that imprison people for speaking out.

I want to talk briefly about some of the problems with member states. Hungary and Poland have elected Governments that are troubling in their attitudes towards minorities. We need to make sure that we keep a very careful eye on what is happening in Hungary and Poland. I also want to mention Armenia, which, under pressure from the Council, signed up to around 70 Council of Europe conventions and reformed its electoral code to ensure that seats in elections were allocated to national minorities. But I read today in *The Times* about the unrest emerging in Armenia. The President has retired from office and has taken on a prime ministerial role. It looks as though, in effect, he will transfer the powers that he had as President to his new role as Prime Minister.

Clearly, Armenia is one of those states that the Council of Europe will have to continue to monitor very carefully. What is happening in the country gives me reason to believe absolutely that the Council of Europe has a crucial role in ensuring that it does not waver from the path that leads it to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

I echo entirely the comments of the hon. Member for North Thanet—I nearly called him “my hon. Friend”, as I think in this context he is—about Russia. We have to be firm in the Russian situation. We cannot be blackmailed by a state that has, in effect, decided that it does not want to abide by the rules relating to international law. It is threatening to undermine financially the work of the Council of Europe. We must stick firmly to our values and send Russia a clear message, but I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling's comment that the door must always be open to dialogue with states such as Russia and Turkey.

Let me mention the Council's electoral observation work. I was in Azerbaijan last week for the presidential election, which was an eye-opening experience, to say the least. Ilgar Mammadov, the leader of the main Opposition party in Azerbaijan, is a political prisoner, and many of the main Opposition parties boycotted the election on that ground. Eight candidates were allowed on the final list, and a number of them actually endorsed Aliyev. This was not a free or fair election. There was widespread intimidation, there were widespread crackdowns on free expression, and on election day I observed the stuffing of ballot papers. Some 20% of observations at polling stations reported irregularities, and irregularities were reported at 50% of the counts observed. On those grounds, the Council of Europe, at its meeting the following morning, determined that the election was not free or fair.

That is only the second election observation mission I have participated in—I went to Armenia last year—but election observation is one of the most important aspects of the work of the Council of Europe. As the hon. Member for North Thanet said, it is one of the key means by which we underpin our values and our belief in democracy and free and fair elections. Although, when we observe elections, we cannot stop corruption or the failure of member states that are monitored to observe free and fair play, it is nevertheless important to continue that observation work and to continue to report abuses of electoral processes. For me, that is one of the key means by which we make progress.

I will finish by endorsing the suggestion made by the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) that we should have an annual debate on the work of the Council of Europe. I also like the idea of an annual statement on the work of the Committee of Ministers. That is a really good idea and would be a key means for Members of this Parliament to be made more aware of the important work of the Council of Europe.

10.12 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). Colleagues have called him their hon. Friend and, given the spirit in which we have talked about the Council of Europe, I completely agree. I find the Council a most relaxing and agreeable place to speak: one can be assured of speaking for three or four minutes without interruption. *[Interruption.]* I see that the Minister is about to leap to his feet, but I will not take any interventions.

The hon. Member for Gedling is absolutely right that we need to do more to promote the Council of Europe. We already promote Select Committees with debates in the main Chamber, and I fully endorse the comment from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) that we should have a debate about the Council on the Floor of the House. However, the hon. Gentleman missed an important point: the Council of Europe itself needs to sell what it does more robustly. Importantly, it has a number of so-called partners for democracy, who sit around the outside of the Chamber and can speak during debates, among whom are the Palestinians and Israel. I cannot think of another organisation where both are present and both speak regularly in debates. It is important to bear that in mind.

[John Howell]

I repeat the comments I made about the European Court of Human Rights. During the Brexit campaign, I think many people thought we were arguing about the European Court of Human Rights when we were actually arguing about the European Court of Justice. There is a tremendous amount to be done to ensure that those Courts are seen to be separate. We should make a point of communicating strongly our success rate with the European Court of Human Rights.

I agree that not everything is lovely at the Council. It has two major problems, both of which we can deal with internally. The first is corruption, which we saw with the previous President of the Parliamentary Assembly. New rules have been introduced that will apply to the Council, and there are more to come: I understand that a 200-page document on corruption in the Council has been prepared. The second problem stems from the Russians' withdrawal of funds: we need to look at the Council's finances as a whole. It is no use continuing with the same means of funding. We need to concentrate on what the Council does best and ensure that it is adequately funded to do that. On those notes, I shall leave the floor to others.

10.16 am

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on securing this timely debate.

I will focus on the Council of Europe convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, which is also known as the Lanzarote convention. The convention requires states to: implement legislative measures to prevent and combat the sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children; protect the rights of child victims without discrimination; promote national and international co-operation; collect and store data on convicted offenders; co-operate with relevant bodies across international borders; protect children; and support victims. There is no doubt that ratifying and implementing the Lanzarote convention would reinforce the UK's efforts to prevent British sex offenders from sexually exploiting and abusing vulnerable children at home and abroad.

The 10th anniversary of the Labour Government signing the Lanzarote convention is 5 May. Sadly, we are still waiting for this Government to ratify it. The convention has been signed by 47 countries, and 42 have managed to ratify it—but not the UK. In January, the Government told me, a mere 10 years on, that they are satisfied that the UK is compliant and are aiming for ratification in the first half of this year. Will the Minister confirm that that is still the case and give us the date when ratification will happen? Ratification of the convention would be a crucial step towards deterring those who believe they can abuse children overseas with impunity. Following my questions, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office revealed that from 2013 to 2017 there were 361 requests for consular assistance by UK nationals who had been arrested for child sex offences. However, embassies are informed of an individual's arrest only if the individual requests it, so that figure is likely to be the tip of the iceberg.

Article 25 of the convention makes specific provision for preventing travelling sex offenders from sexually exploiting and abusing children abroad. The charity ECPAT UK has documented more than 300 cases of British nationals abusing children abroad. UK offenders continue to pose an acute threat to vulnerable children overseas, and we need to strengthen our laws to prevent that. Ratifying the Lanzarote convention would help to promote greater international co-operation, information sharing and use of extraterritorial legislation. I urge the Minister to do all he can to ensure that ratification happens.

10.18 am

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on calling this debate.

I begin by paying tribute to my colleagues, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), who, in his three days as President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, did more for the United Kingdom's international relations than Her Majesty's Government often do in 12 months. That is no reflection on the Minister.

Sir Roger Gale: When we thank people, we always miss somebody out. Before I get into terrible trouble, I should say that it would be remiss of me not to thank, through my right hon. Friend, our secretariat here: Nick Wright and his team, in particular Jonathan Finlay, who, as she said, has done so much to promote our cause. We are indebted to them all the time.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: In making a list, there is a danger that we will miss someone out, but I had that on my list. As I will mention later, the redoubtable Nick Wright and his team really look after us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), who leads the European Conservatives, has worked tirelessly to make the European Conservatives—surprisingly enough—now the third largest political group in the Council of Europe. I also pay tribute to all other Members from the other parties, because we truly are UK plc. We are a really good team, not managed by mission control—although we are well served by Christopher Yvon and his team, who provide us with advice.

I do not think that people fully realise what the achievements of the Council of Europe are, so it is worth repeating them briefly. It was responsible for ending the death penalty in Europe by making it an accession condition, which is one of its proudest and best achievements. We are a death penalty-free zone thanks to the Assembly's efforts. After 1989, it also helped the ex-communist countries move to democracy. When we really think about what has happened over the European territory in that time, what this fantastic institution has contributed is remarkable.

We have already mentioned the hijacking of “Ode to Joy” and the flag, which is a great shame. The organisation has also inspired a host of national laws, pressing for new conventions. It provides a forum to debate timely, really hot and controversial social, political and international topics. It has sought to hold debates on major social issues that have divided Europeans, including advancing the rights of minorities such as the Roma and the LGBT

community, and dealt with painful issues such as the relationships between Russia and Georgia and some of the crimes of communism. It is certainly leading the way in terms of gender balance as far as the committees and its operation are concerned.

I do not want to repeat everything that has already been said, but I do want to mention the system of rapporteurs. We have nine committees, and I am pleased to be the vice-president of the Political Affairs and Democracy Committee. In fact, for my sins I am currently the rapporteur on the commitment to introduce rules to ensure fair referendums in Council of Europe member states. I have to say, I achieved the rapporteurship with help from Lord Foulkes, a member of the Labour delegation. I sometimes think it may be a poisoned chalice, but I am honoured to be working with the Venice Commission and with an expert, Dr Alan Renwick, from the Constitution Unit.

Hannah Bardell: I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing that role. I and those in my party very much look forward to working and engaging with her on that issue.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Every cloud has a silver lining. The issue is important, particularly because of the referendums we have had in this country, and the Catalan referendum and others. The rules need updating.

The rapporteurs' work is broad and far-reaching. For example, we are evaluating the status of the Kyrgyz Republic and Morocco and Jordan as partners for democracy, and we are looking at strengthening our co-operation with the UN, the political transition in Egypt and the dialogue with Algeria—I could go on. There is a really impressive list, and I hope the Government will take that on board and read the reports as they come through, because they contain valuable information.

In addition to calling for an annual debate on the work of the Council of Europe on the Floor of the House in Government time, I will sow another seed. The last time I was at a plenary session, I asked the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority if I could take one of my researchers with me, because it is quite difficult to explain how the Council of Europe operates. It is completely different from here, exceedingly complex and full of layers—and controversies, as it happens, at the moment. Of course, as Members of Parliament, we now have limitless travel in Europe, which is a great improvement, for which we thank IPSA, and our researchers can travel for us, if necessary, on parliamentary business anywhere in the UK.

I ended up supporting my researcher to come for four days to the Council of Europe. I think—I hope—she found it really interesting and rewarding. It was good to work with Nick and the team here and to meet the ambassadorial team and all the Members, and it gave her a greater understanding to support my work as a parliamentarian. I hope the powers that be will look at that, because it is not unreasonable for full-time members of the Council of Europe to be allowed at least one trip for a member of their research team to come with them—to enable us to do a much better job, Minister, on behalf of UK plc.

That said, the UK delegation punches above its weight, because it really is the epitome of a national team from our four constituent nations and both Houses of Parliament working together in harmony in the interests of UK plc

—and, more importantly, in the interests of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe. I am proud to be a member of the delegation.

10.25 am

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on securing the debate. I will not take up much time—I have cut my speech back so that we can get other people in—but I want to make a couple of points.

The Russian Federation joined the Council back in 1996, but it does not send a delegation at the moment because of the imposition of sanctions on it over the invasion of Ukraine, another member state. Russia has stopped its payments to the Council and threatened to leave the institution completely, denying its 140 million citizens access to the European Court of Human Rights. Russia accounts for more than a third of the Court's case load. That is another example of Russia's systematic attempt to bully and undermine multilateral institutions, and it is testing the boundaries of what is acceptable in international relations.

We know about Russia's hybrid activity, which is trying to sow division in other countries, but I want to quote from a journalist from Ukraine—whose name I will pronounce wrongly—Roman Skaskiw, who wrote of the nine lessons of Russian propaganda. I will not quote them all, but we can understand four of them. The first is:

“Rely on dissenting political groups to deliver your message abroad; far right is as good as far left”.

Others are:

“Destroy and ridicule the idea of truth...Pollute the information space”

and

“Accuse the enemy of doing what you are doing to confuse the conversation.”

That is exactly what is happening at the moment, and we should consider that.

I have been on the delegation to the Council for a couple of years and have observed that the countries that seem to have more interest in it are the eastern European, former Warsaw pact countries. Whenever a session in the hemicycle finishes, it is their media there; we do not see the BBC or ITN. They seem to have a thirst for the debate. I also understand that the sessions are shown live on the equivalent of BBC Parliament in about a dozen countries around Europe. The idea of a debate on the Floor of the House and a statement on the Council of Ministers is exactly right.

The problem we have at the moment, and the lesson for me in all this, is that the members of the generation who fought the second world war are becoming fewer in number. As a new generation who did not live through the cold war matures—perhaps as a consequence they may experience a new one—perhaps we should remind ourselves of these words: the price of liberty is eternal vigilance.

10.29 am

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am proud to be a member of the Council of Europe, especially as I have been reincarnated. I wear it as a badge of honour that I was sacked by David Cameron for voting for a fair referendum and purdah. Let me say to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) that I want to

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

nail the lie that the Council of Europe is used by the leadership of various parties to dump people who disagree with them. That is an outrageous slur.

The Council of Europe is a noble concept. As we know, it was founded by Winston Churchill, who was clear that although he wanted continental countries to join some sort of justiciable entity, he did not think that appropriate for Great Britain. We are proud of the work that we have done right through the '50s, and particularly in the 1990s with bringing eastern Europe back into democracy. However, I think that the Council of Europe and the Court of Human Rights have lost their way, and the Court in particular has become too intrusive. It was founded to counter fascism and extremism, but as we have seen, particularly with the row over prisoners' voting rights, it is becoming too intrusive in the internal workings of democracies. In a sense, the Council of Europe has also lost its way, and we have heard about the corruption scandals and money problems.

Where do we go now? I am not in favour of just letting Russia in after all its depredations in Crimea, Ukraine and Syria. Of course the Council of Europe is not for sale, but it is not just a question of money. Other countries in eastern Europe, and particularly Turkey, have also been playing games with money. It is not just Russia; a lot of people should be criticised for this issue. The trouble with expelling a country such as Russia is that eventually it has to be let back in. The Council of Europe is not like the European Union; it is primarily a parliamentary assembly that enables countries that come from different directions, with different forms of democracy and different problems, to talk to each other. Many countries in the Council of Europe, especially Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan are not shining lights of democracy. Indeed, Azerbaijan and Armenia in particular have really been engaging almost in a state of war.

Where do we go from here? I do not have any obvious solutions, but the Minister is present, and the Council of Europe and the Committee of Ministers is attended—the Russians do turn up. It is not quite true that we have expelled the Russians from the Council of Europe. They do turn up, and I know from speaking to our ambassador that he engages with them. It is a conduit of discussion. I do not know what the solution is, but I understand from my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) that the Russians are sending a representative to the Parliamentary Assembly next week. There are wheels within wheels, and ways—without forgetting our principles—to try to bring them back into some kind of democratic assembly. I shall leave it there, because that is what the Council of Europe is surely about: whatever our disagreements, it is better to talk than to make war.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. We now come to the Front-Bench speakers, who have about nine minutes each. I apologise to those who were not called.

10.33 am

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Hosie, and I apologise again for my lateness. It is somewhat unfortunate to be presided over by a member of my party and to be late, but constituency matters held me back.

Like others, I pay tribute to Nick Wright, Jonathan Finlay, and the staff who serve us so well. As a new member of the Council of Europe, I lead the SNP group together with my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). We were well served by our predecessors, Alex Salmond and Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, and I pay tribute to their work. Unfortunately, the press were not very kind to them at times, but those who served with them at the Council of Europe know the incredible power of work that they did, and how hard they worked on behalf of the SNP and Scotland. It is important to put that on the record.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) for securing this debate, and for his passion and verve. His speech was fantastic, and I hope that people will watch this debate and understand the work of the Council of Europe. When I was asked to take on this role by our group leader, I took it very seriously. I admit that I was not prepared for the volume of work and the complexity of the issues raised, or for the amount of time it would take up. The suggestion from the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) about staff is sensible. We are accountable to our constituents for the use of public money, but we can only promote and do our best in the Council of Europe—and, indeed, with all our work—if the right resources are available to us. The promotion of such work is extremely important.

I wish to reflect a little on what others have said, and on my recent experiences at the Assembly's first sitting this year. At the Irish ambassador's reception, he made a powerful speech about the work of the Council of Europe and its importance post-Brexit, particularly for trade and international relations, as well as the continuation of campaigns for human rights and democracy. Many people do not realise that the Council of Europe brought an end to the death penalty in Europe, or that the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights have allowed people to take forward many cases. A number of those cases have been very high profile, particularly on the rights of service personnel who have suffered injury or death, and the rights of LGBT people.

As we leave the EU, we must reflect on what our role in Europe will be. The SNP has a clear position of maintaining membership of the single market and customs union, but as many have said we put politics aside when we come to the Council of Europe and we work together. Towards the end of our time at the Council of Europe, the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and I had a very interesting discussion about deaths abroad—that is an issue on which I have been working on behalf of my constituent, Kirsty Maxwell, and a matter that I hope to raise at the Council of Europe. The hon. Gentleman and I could not be at more opposite ends of the political spectrum, but we had a shared interest on a shared issue, and the Council of Europe gave us the opportunity to have a discussion about that. He gave me his personal support, for which I was grateful, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to him and reflect that the Assembly gave us space to have that discussion.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that one important point that has not yet been mentioned is that each member of the Council

of Europe is a parliamentarian who has been elected in their own country? That cornerstone of democracy is so important to the Council of Europe.

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree, and our being able to return to our constituencies and report on the work done by us and the Council of Europe is important. We must look for as many opportunities as we can to do that within this place, and in the media, and there is an opportunity to engage more positively.

I remember returning home on the tube one evening and reading a declaration in the *London Evening Standard* that it had a new Brussels correspondent. I thought, “Well, isn’t that ironic? Where have they been for the last 10 years?” There was a recent report about the reportage not just of the EU and its institutions, but of Europe in general, and the UK came very near the bottom for quality of reportage and coverage. I do not wish to diverge or digress too much, but the sad truth about Brexit is that people are learning about the EU, what it brings to them and its benefits, only as we leave. We will continue to be a member of the Council of Europe and, for the many reasons that people have highlighted, its work will be extremely important.

Let me reflect briefly on some of my observations from the Hemicycle during the initial days that I spent there. It is completely different from the Chamber of the House of Commons. There is electronic voting. Voting takes merely a few moments; I could not help reflecting on that and thinking, as I put my fingers into the black box and pressed the buttons, how much quicker and more efficient this place would be if we had a similar voting system—[HON. MEMBERS: “No! No!”] I know there will be many dissenting voices, but I will press on.

It was also incredible to see the Danish national girls’ choir sweep into the Hemicycle and sing for the Members. It would be difficult to imagine something like that happening in the Chamber of the House of Commons—although perhaps we should consider putting it to Mr Speaker—with people taking pictures of each other and engaging in a lively, democratic way.

The hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) mentioned the breadth of coverage of the Council of Europe, and the number of people: 820 million people is incredible. He leads us ably and I have enjoyed working with him very much. He has spoken of the breadth of issues dealt with and challenged there, including torture, racism and trafficking. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) spoke about child trafficking and her work on that. As to the fact that the UK Government have not ratified the Lanzarote convention on child sexual exploitation, it is important that we continue to press the matter.

Sir Alan Duncan: Perhaps I can put the hon. Lady’s mind, and that of the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), at rest by confirming that our assessment is that we are now compliant to ratify the convention. We laid the means of doing so before Parliament last week, on 12 April, so the hon. Member for Rotherham can dance a little jig of joy.

Hannah Bardell: That is excellent news and testament to the work of the hon. Lady, as well as the work done and pressure put on by the Council of Europe.

For my part, the work of the SNP in the Council will be very much about putting forward Scotland’s voice about its place in Europe, as well as working with colleagues on issues of common interest. I look forward to working with the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham in her role as rapporteur on referendums. She will know that, whatever side of the argument—if any—people took in the 2014 referendum in Scotland, it has been held up as the gold standard in terms of process. I hope that we can work together.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: As the hon. Lady may know, I also had the pleasure of holding a referendum that went without any hitch at all, in Wales.

Hannah Bardell: I am glad to hear that. It sounds as if the right hon. Lady has the right expertise and credentials. Hers is an important role, and we look forward to working with her on it. I look forward to working with colleagues across the House in our future endeavours at the Council of Europe.

10.42 am

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Hosie.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) for securing this debate, whose importance is testified to by the fact that it has been attended by the leaders of the Labour and Conservative groups, and the leader of the UK delegation, as well as other hon. Members. The people that I should like to thank for supporting me during my period at the Council of Europe are Terry Davis, who was the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill, and who became the Secretary General of the Council of Europe; Sir Alan Meale, the former Member for Mansfield, who also did great work and supported me; and two current Members, Lord Foulkes and Lord Anderson. They ably supported me while I was there, and they deserve a mention.

Since the day of the EU referendum, almost two years ago, the Government’s approach to Brexit has often been light on substance, but it has rarely been short of a good slogan or two. Hence we hear a lot from Ministers about global Britain, and they reassure us that while we are leaving the EU we are not leaving Europe. If we take the Government’s word for that—and I hope that we can—a post-Brexit renewal of our commitment to the Council of Europe would be a good place to start. Of course, as an institution it is quite different from the EU. It is a much less formal grouping of countries, based on shared values rather than a legal or political union, but it is none the worse for that.

In what I believe was her first speech on the theme of global Britain, the Prime Minister spoke of her belief in the UK as a country with the “self-confidence and freedom” to embrace our international responsibilities and play our

“full part in promoting peace and prosperity around the world”.

Surely one of the best examples of the UK playing just such an independent leadership role is our history as a founding member of the Council of Europe, and, going hand in hand with that, as a lead author of the European convention on human rights. Important as that historic legacy is, it is not enough by itself to guarantee our

[Mr Khalid Mahmood]

continued status as a respected leader and staunch upholder of the values enshrined in the European Court of Human Rights. That is especially true given how clear it is that we have not yet reached universal adherence to the Court, even among the membership of the Council. We must continue to strive for that. There may still be some distance to go, but that should not be considered as evidence of the failure of the Council of Europe or the convention itself. The very fact that the membership of the Council remains so large and diverse is testament to the enduring appeal of what we may proudly call European values.

Of course it is true that member states, including, at times, the UK, have not always embraced the implications of membership when they take the form of Court decisions with which we may not entirely agree; but the integrity of the Council and of its membership surely depends on our willingness to lead by example in honouring our obligation to respect both the convention and the Court that enforces it. Only then can we make a forceful case, as surely we must, to member states such as Russia and Turkey—and Azerbaijan and Armenia, which have been mentioned in the debate—that they too must respect the human rights enshrined in the charter.

My mention of Turkey is no coincidence, given the Turkish Government's refusal to comply with a ruling by the European Court that was rightly cheered by many as a bold endorsement of the principles of free speech. In ordering the release of two imprisoned journalists, Mehmet Altan and Şahin Alpay, the Court made it clear that their continued detention constitutes a breach of their right to freedom of expression. Obviously the two journalists were by no means the only people for whom the ruling was significant. After all, they were just two of some 160,000 people who have lost either their jobs or their liberty in the crackdown that followed an attempted coup. The Minister has taken a huge step in confronting the Turkish Government and I hope that he will continue to do that, because it is important. Such action is what the Council of Europe is based on, and I commend the Minister for the work that he has done.

I have some questions for the Government. Can they give an unequivocal commitment that they will not attempt to undermine, unpick or water down our commitment as a country to the European Court of Human Rights or the Council of Europe? Will they instead seek a stronger, more active and more prominent role for the UK within the Council after we leave the EU? If so, can the Minister share with us any specific plans that the Government may have for us? I wonder whether he would also be prepared to consider the suggestion made by the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) about an annual debate, and respond to us formally. This debate is on an important subject, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling is to be commended for securing it. Many hon. Members have made thoughtful contributions, and I am sure that the Minister will match them in that.

10.49 am

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), as I think we all are, for securing the debate and launching it with such an excellent speech. I

hope that I will not embarrass him too much if I say that I think it is the best speech I have ever heard in Westminster Hall. His enthusiasm is infectious.

I welcome this opportunity to put on the record my appreciation not just of the hon. Gentleman's contribution, but of the contributions and work of all the other members of the UK delegation, and of all the things they have chieved and will achieve. For instance, the hon. Gentleman has made a significant impact on the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, and I was particularly grateful for his work in inspiring the Parliamentary Assembly's motion in October condemning trafficking in human beings. As hon. Members are well aware, there is a great coincidence of passion and effort here, as tackling modern slavery is a major priority for the Prime Minister personally and for the Government more widely.

I am also grateful for the contributions of other hon. Members in the debate. I will set out the UK's commitment and contribution to the Council of Europe, and share our vision of how, together, member states can overcome the challenges it faces. I will try to respond to some of the points raised, but I am pleased to have already been able to respond to my genuine friend, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), on the Lanzarote convention. I am sure that the House will endorse that without question and very rapidly.

The Government are committed to enabling people to realise their potential. Protecting and promoting human rights is central to that objective. More broadly, it is an essential aim of our foreign policy. That is why the Council of Europe is so important to the UK. We recognise and appreciate the valuable role it plays in advancing work on human rights, democracy and the rule of law across Europe.

As the UK prepares to leave the EU, the Council of Europe will be just as important to us. Indeed—perhaps this is the main point of the debate—it will become more important to us. Our continuing commitment to the Council of Europe is one of a number of examples to which I could point that give meaning to our message that, as we have heard this morning, although we are leaving the EU, we are not leaving Europe. We will have the same friends and the same objectives, but a different structure. Our membership provides a platform to pursue common values and aspirations, alongside our many and continuing European friends.

We were, of course, a founding member of the Council of Europe; we were there from the very start. We helped to shape and draft the statute, which originally was the treaty of London, and we were at the centre of efforts to draft the European convention on human rights. Since those early days, as we have heard, Council of Europe membership has increased from 10 to 47, encompassing almost all of Europe. Its core activities of setting standards, monitoring compliance and providing assistance help to advance human rights and democracy across all those member states. It will and it must continue to do so.

A multitude of Government experts support the work of the Council of Europe, and its numerous bodies, including the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Parliamentary Assembly, play a vital role in holding member states to account. I am grateful for all the work of the UK delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly, which is a wonderful example of cross-party

co-operation and shows the strength of our commitment. I hope that all those who are involved feel that there is a good working relationship between the Council and those of us who are Ministers taking an interest in the work being done.

The bedrock of the Council of Europe is of course the European convention on human rights. There have been questions, here and in Strasbourg, about our commitment to the convention. As my ministerial colleagues have made clear in recent debates in the House, the Government have absolutely no plans to withdraw from the ECHR. As I assured Secretary-General Jagland in November, we remain committed to the Council of Europe.

The European Court of Human Rights has raised human rights standards across Europe. In the UK, few of us would question its rulings in cases such as *Dudgeon* or *Tyrer*, which turned the tide on the criminalisation of homosexual acts and on corporal punishment respectively. However, to protect the long-term credibility of the Court, we must enable it to concentrate on the most serious human rights violations. The Danish Government, who currently chair the Committee of Ministers, share that vision. We worked closely with them on the recent Copenhagen declaration, which advances reform of the convention system, building on our own Brighton declaration of 2012.

There are also conventions covering areas beyond human rights and the rule of law. As part of our anti-corruption strategy, we intend soon to sign two new sports conventions on match fixing and safety at football matches and other sporting events. UK experts played a major role in shaping those conventions.

The Council of Europe, as we have heard, deploys a range of monitoring mechanisms to assess implementation of the standards that members have signed up to. It also assists member states to meet their commitments, including through the work of the Venice Commission, the Commissioner for Human Rights, expert groups and co-operation programmes. Working through multilateral organisations such as the Council of Europe addresses the sensitivities of some member states about receiving foreign assistance.

Through our Magna Carta fund for human rights and democracy, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has supported a number of Council of Europe projects. Those include projects supporting judicial reforms in Ukraine, countering violent extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and strengthening the ombudsman service in Russia—perhaps a slightly more challenging task. Through our conflict, stability and security fund, we have contributed almost €600,000 to a Council of Europe project to strengthen human rights standards in the armed forces in Armenia, allowing it to meet its obligations under the ECHR and to help its army attain modern standards and values. We have also provided £150,000

to support Council of Europe work on strengthening the cyber-crime convention. The UK-supported convention moves us further away from calls for new treaties that would regulate cyber-space in a way that was unacceptable to the UK.

As we have heard, however, there are a number of challenges facing the Council of Europe. For instance, for many years the organisation has had difficulty in allocating its budget to core priorities. It has also struggled to keep up with the bulging caseload of its Strasbourg Court. Some will want to put pressure on Turkey to strengthen its judicial system, and we have heard some compelling arguments why. One of the advantages of doing so is that it will avoid a wave of new applications that might put further strain on the Strasbourg Court.

I share the secretary-general's goal of keeping Turkey engaged. As we have heard, I have personally been working on that pretty well since the first day I became a Foreign Minister, which coincided with the attempted coup in Turkey. Indeed, I will be there next week representing the former entente powers at the 103rd annual commemoration of the Gallipoli campaign—a significant moment illustrating that, whereas a century ago we were enemies, today we can look across at each other as friends. I look forward to continuing to work with Turkey through the Council of Europe to support its judicial system, not just because that is the best way to minimise further strain on the European Court of Human Rights, but because it matters in itself.

It is not just the Court that is under pressure; so too is the Council's budget. While it is disappointing that Turkey has rescinded its grand payeur status, it continues none the less to pay its basic contribution, as it is obliged to do. However, Russia's withholding of its budget since July last year, in retaliation for sanctions imposed by the Parliamentary Assembly following the annexation of Crimea, looks much more intractable. That failure will be a long-standing issue that we must resolve in the context of our opposing Russia's overall belligerence and aggression. I understand the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) about the importance of engaging in that context. The significant budgetary pressures faced by the Council of Europe increase the urgency on the secretariat to implement the necessary reforms and efficiencies to deliver a more efficient organisation, focused on core activities. The UK Government stand ready to support those reforms.

I can assure the House that the Government will remain fully committed to the Council of Europe. I urge all my hon. Friends on both sides of the House to continue in the very good work that they do.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the work of the Council of Europe.

Leaving the EU: Veterinary Profession in Wales

11 am

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the veterinary profession in Wales.

Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Hosie. It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I am grateful for the opportunity to debate the future of the veterinary sector in Wales, and particularly the impact that leaving the European Union will have on it. It is a profession that does not always receive due attention, but it is nevertheless hugely important, not only to my constituency of Ceredigion and other rural areas in Wales but to the whole of the country.

I begin by emphasising that, regardless of one's opinion of the UK's membership of the European Union, we can all agree that that membership has significantly shaped the veterinary sector in several ways, including through legislation on animal health and welfare standards, the invaluable contribution that freedom of movement has made to the veterinary workforce, and the accessibility of safe, rigorously tested veterinary medicines to name but a few. Those are key pillars of the sector and will undoubtedly be impacted by the Government's decision to leave both the EU single market and the customs union. As such, it is important that the Government address these challenges, to ensure that preparations are thorough, so that the veterinary sector is in robust health and is able to operate effectively in a post EU-membership climate.

I know that those of us here acknowledge the importance of the veterinary profession and its particular contribution to making rural communities sustainable. A strong veterinary workforce is vital to maintaining high animal health and welfare standards, food safety standards and overall public health in Wales. We should not underestimate the role that local vets play in their communities.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I should declare an interest: my wife works for Carmarthen Veterinary Centre and Hospital back home in the motherland. I was recently at a leaving do for Mr Phillip Williams, who founded the practice 40 years ago. One of the farmers—Mr John James of Tŷ Llwyd, Felingwm, who is a very famous farmer in Carmarthenshire—made a tribute speech and said there are only two people he trusts in the world: his GP and his vet. Does that not show how important vets are to the rural Welsh economy?

Ben Lake: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It illustrates what important pillars of communities vets are, particularly in rural areas.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): On that point, there was always a theory that if something was doctored it was slightly suspicious, but if it was vetted it was generally considered to be sound.

Ben Lake: The hon. Gentleman succinctly makes the same point. It is true that, in rural areas, whether in Wales or any other part of the UK, the vet is very much

a pillar of the local community. Whether by bringing solace to weary pet owners, safeguarding standards in the meat processing sector or supporting farmers to rear healthy livestock, they perform a crucial service.

We often hear about the function of the financial services sector and how it helps to keep the economy of London and the south-east ticking, but just as important, although seldom commented on, is the role played by the veterinary profession in rural areas and how it keeps the very heart of those areas beating. Whether in times of tranquillity or turbulence, the local vet is the very foundation of the agricultural community—a constant and dependable figure, as perhaps best conveyed by the books of James Herriot. I must declare that I was not alive to witness at first hand the scenes depicted by those books; in fact, I was not around to witness the first TV series based on the books. However, the role that vets play in sustaining communities in Wales—as the backbone of the rural economy—is just as indispensable now as it was in the 1930s.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is my constituency neighbour, for bringing the debate. I know about the veterinary profession not from books but from having managed a veterinary practice employing 14 vets before coming into this place. On the basis of what I have so far heard from the Government about their plans to allow vets into the country, if I was still running that practice I would not be concerned. However, he is right: it is a vital industry.

Ben Lake: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is my constituency neighbour, for his intervention. I very much hope that I will today be as reassured and convinced as he is that the Government's plans to ensure a robust future for the veterinary profession are well founded.

It is true that, given the volatility that the agricultural industry all too often faces and the likelihood that further changes are on the horizon, safeguarding the veterinary profession must be a priority. Plaid Cymru has consistently maintained that continued membership of the single market, customs union and other EU agencies would be the most constructive way forward to do that. I will elaborate on that later.

The agricultural and food sectors are underpinned by veterinary services—I know I am labouring the point, but it is important—which contributed £62 million to the economy of west Wales alone and £100 million to the economy of Wales in 2016. In Wales, 3,500 people are employed in the sector, almost 1,400 vets having graduated in the EU and settled in Wales, benefiting from the ability to live, work and study in 28 countries as part of single market membership.

The veterinary sector is not the only one in Wales that is supported by a workforce from the EU, but leaving the single market, and potentially losing the ability to easily attract the vets that we need, will have serious repercussions. The profession is relatively small, but its reach and impact are significant. The ramifications of losing just a small percentage of the workforce could be substantial. For example, the British Veterinary Association has detailed the profound consequences of losing official veterinarians from slaughterhouses, where up to 95% of vets registering to work in the meat hygiene workforce graduated overseas. That would

potentially increase the risk of food fraud and animal welfare breaches and would undermine a level of public health reassurance to consumers at home and overseas, which could indirectly jeopardise our trading prospects.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour on securing the debate. I note the contribution that vets and farriers make to our home lives, and possibly the contribution they have taken from my bank account in the past as well. Does he welcome past comments from Ministers from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that emphasise that technological methods of oversight, such as CCTV cameras, can in no way replace official veterinarians in safeguarding animal welfare and food standards in our abattoirs?

Ben Lake: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour makes an important point—it is not an either/or situation; it is a matter of enhancing confidence in animal welfare and animal hygiene standards. It is not a matter of having one or the other; it is about having both. These are serious concerns, so I would welcome reassurances from the Minister that they are being addressed, and that measures will be in place in good time before the UK leaves the European Union.

Another, perhaps more long-term challenge that we face in the veterinary profession, and one that has a particular relevance to Wales, is our capability to educate and train our own vets. Given that Welsh agriculture is overwhelmingly constituted of animal husbandry, it beggars belief that we still do not have a centre for people to undertake veterinary training in Wales. Rather like traveling from north to south Wales by train, for somebody to become a vet in Wales, they have to go through England first.

I am pleased that plans to bring veterinary medicine training to Aberystwyth University in Ceredigion are being discussed with the Royal Veterinary College in London. Unsurprisingly, I wholeheartedly support that endeavour, and I hope that the agricultural industry and Welsh Government support the realisation of these ambitious plans. I strongly believe that doing so would ensure a continuous supply of high-quality vets in Wales and would also encourage more individuals from areas such as Ceredigion to enter the profession.

Chris Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so generous with his time. I should put it on the record that I am delighted and honoured to be an honorary associate of the British Veterinary Association. On this very point, I was in Hong Kong last week, and when I quizzed Hong Kong's Minister of Agriculture on veterinary services, she said Hong Kong and China and many other parts of the world look up to our academia and training for veterinary surgeons in this country. Those are held on a pedestal right across the world.

Ben Lake: I again thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I wholeheartedly agree with him. It is a real asset to the United Kingdom that we have such high-quality veterinary training and research. I just hope that Aberystwyth University can, in the very near future, contribute to that revered status and reputation.

Research conducted recently by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons has shown that nearly one in five EU vets are now actively looking for work outside the

UK. Fulfilling demand for veterinary surgeons will be essential not just to maintain animal welfare standards and hygiene, but to our trading prospects. The BVA has warned that in the short to medium term, it will be impossible to meet the demand with UK nationals alone, so the profession does face the possibility of a workforce shortage and Wales faces a significant new barrier to trade.

The import and export of animals to third countries requires veterinary certification, and that in turn depends on having sufficient numbers of adequately trained vets. Official veterinarians both certify and supervise the import and export of live animals and provide official controls at food exporting premises and border inspection posts. Should the UK leave the single market and customs union and subsequently fail to enter into a form of customs union with the EU, administrative checks would apply to UK imports from and exports to the EU, as well as to any other countries that the UK trades with. The demand for veterinary certification is already increasing, and if that becomes our default trading position, the demand will only grow exponentially.

Nigel Gibbens, the UK's former chief veterinary officer, recently warned that such a scenario could mean that the volume of products requiring veterinary export health certification would increase by as much as 325%, at a time when our ability to recruit the very vets that we need to issue certificates was significantly hindered. I therefore urge the Government to maintain the working rights for non-British EU vets and registered veterinary nurses currently working and studying in Wales, and the rest of the UK, and that the veterinary profession be added to the shortage occupation list—a call that the BVA itself has made.

Before concluding, I must stress the importance of a strong veterinary profession to the continuance of Welsh agricultural exports. Any prospect of a thriving agricultural export market will be realised only if we have enough vets to maintain the high standard of Welsh produce. Confidence in animal welfare and hygiene standards bestows a premium on Welsh products, and we cannot allow that to be undermined.

Liz Saville Roberts: I appreciate my hon. Friend's giving me the opportunity to raise something that is a particular source of concern in Wales. We suffer from the fact that 70% of Welsh cattle are exported to England for slaughter. We need to maintain our slaughterhouses, our abattoirs, as effectively as possible, with veterinary backing, but the side effect of exporting 70% of Welsh cattle is that we are losing out on the Hybu Cig Cymru red meat levy, which is currently going to England. That needs to be addressed; it has been waiting to be addressed for a number of years now.

Ben Lake: I thank my hon. Friend for raising a very important point, which has been under discussion and close scrutiny in Wales for quite some time. Successive Welsh Affairs Committees have raised it as an important point to be addressed quite urgently by the Government. I hope that perhaps it can be addressed now, before we leave the European Union, because a considerable amount of money is going out of the pockets of Welsh farmers, essentially, that could otherwise go towards marketing the premium product that they have to offer.

[Ben Lake]

It is a strong veterinary workforce that minimises the risk of food fraud, promotes animal welfare and provides public health reassurance, making our produce attractive and thus helping to preserve the viability of Welsh agriculture. To conclude, therefore, the role of the veterinary profession in facilitating trade and protecting public health, food safety and animal welfare is essential. The immediate challenges facing the workforce require the Government to ensure the continued flow of trained professionals from the EU and overseas. To prevent future shortages, however, we must also increase the number of UK veterinary graduates. As I have said, I very much hope that Aberystwyth will be considered as a location for one of those centres. The value of the local vet to our communities, and of the veterinary profession to our agricultural and food industries in particular, mean that we cannot turn a blind eye to the challenges facing the sector. I therefore urge the Minister to ensure that whatever agreement the UK reaches with the EU, the role that the profession fulfils to enable trade, protect animal health, safeguard animal welfare and retain consumer confidence is recognised and addressed. Diolch yn fawr, Mr Hosie.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on securing the debate on what I agree is an important issue.

In Wales, and indeed the rest of the United Kingdom, EU nationals make a significant contribution to the veterinary workforce, and the Government are committed to ensuring that EU nationals can continue working in the UK post EU exit. This debate is therefore timely, as preparations continue apace towards our exit from the EU in March 2019. As the hon. Gentleman points out, the work of the veterinary profession is crucial in so many aspects to our economy and society. Whether they are working in private practice, industry, research, government or a host of other roles, members of the profession play a vital role in protecting animal health through surveillance and treatment to prevent, detect and control disease outbreaks, and in safeguarding public health by similarly addressing the threat of animal diseases that affect humans and by encouraging and supporting the responsible use of antibiotics in animals to reduce the spread of antimicrobial resistance.

Vets maintain, improve and assure our world-leading animal welfare standards. As has been eloquently pointed out, vets also facilitate trade and, we hope, the growth of trade in animals and animal products through the process of certifying, verifying and inspecting export and import consignments. Finally, they ensure food safety, especially by carrying out statutory official feed and food controls, which guarantee consumer confidence.

The Government recognise that certainty and continuity are of great importance as we leave the European Union and are keen to seek a constructive and beneficial working relationship with the EU as we go forward. I am talking about certainty on the high standards of animal health and welfare and on the ability to trade animals and animal products, the continuity of a thriving

veterinary profession and continuity in our world-class research and development. We will look to enhance existing animal health and welfare standards and international commitments on food safety, transparency and traceability, while securing our position at the forefront of the global agri-food industry. We are a nation that trades on a reputation for reliable, good-quality and fairly priced products, and we have an opportunity to enhance that.

In all areas of veterinary work, I fully recognise, and want to place on the record, how much we owe to members of the profession from outside the UK. A fundamental part of ensuring the future success of the veterinary profession in the UK and the successful delivery of the vital roles that I have outlined is ensuring that we continue to have access to a talented workforce, both in Wales and in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The hon. Gentleman will know that almost one quarter of all practising vets in the UK are from the rest of the European Union, as are 50% of all new vets joining the RCVS register to work in the UK. I can assure him that the Department is fully aware, in relation to veterinary public health roles, that about 95% of the official veterinarians who are contracted to work in meat hygiene roles are non-UK EU citizens. For Government, industry and the profession itself, it is vital that after we leave the European Union non-UK nationals currently based here continue working in veterinary roles in the UK; we want them to continue to do so. That is particularly important because, based on current numbers, we cannot rely solely on our domestic graduates to fill the demand for veterinary surgeons.

A key point that we want to ensure the House is aware of is that we are absolutely focused on mutual recognition of professional qualifications. The Government are seeking a negotiated deal with our European partners within which we want to continue arrangements for mutual recognition of those qualifications. As part of that, two significant agreements have recently been reached. First, agreement was reached at the December 2017 European Council that existing rights under the mutual recognition of professional qualifications directive, under which EU nationals can register to work as vets in the UK, will be retained, so that existing EU nationals in the UK veterinary workforce will be entitled to continue working in the UK after withdrawal, and vice versa.

Secondly, agreement was reached at the March 2018 European Council on the transition—the implementation period—until the end of December 2020. That means that between the end of March 2018 and that date, EU nationals will continue to be registered to work in the UK as vets, in accordance with mutual recognition arrangements that will be incorporated into UK law. Those two agreements, if incorporated into the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, will go a long way towards securing a veterinary workforce that meets existing requirements. However, that will depend, understandably, on the continued desire of EU nationals to remain in the UK and to seek to come here to work after we leave the EU.

As I have already indicated, the Government's long-term aim is to build a sustainable, thriving, diverse and modernised UK veterinary infrastructure, which is resilient to workforce impacts and able to take opportunities upon leaving the EU. To achieve this, the veterinary capability and capacity project has been established as a

collaborative initiative in which the Government, through DEFRA and the Animal and Plant Health Agency, are working in close co-operation with the Food Standards Agency, the devolved Administrations, including the Welsh Government, and key stakeholders, specifically the regulator of the veterinary profession, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and the representative body of the veterinary profession, the BVA. We want to develop a flexible and skilled workforce that meets the UK's needs to fill essential roles in Government and the private sector.

The chief veterinary officer for Wales, Christianne Glossop, represents the Welsh Government on the board of this partnership, along with the chief veterinary officers for the UK, Scotland and Northern Ireland Governments. This ensures that issues specific to Wales can be addressed, although many of the same concerns about vet shortages and reliance on EU national veterinary surgeons are shared. The FSA uses the services of 258 such vets in meat inspection roles, and around 40 of those are in Wales. I pointed out earlier that 95% of officials across the UK are non-UK EU citizens, but in Wales all 40 are non-UK EU nationals. Wales also relies on EU national vets as part of its bovine TB eradication programme. We fully recognise that any future restrictions on EU migration could therefore have implications for the functioning of the food supply chain in Wales and bovine TB eradication measures. The partnership is looking at a range of initiatives, in addition to ensuring that processes are in place to secure non-UK veterinary resources, including strengthening retention of existing vets in the workforce and increasing the longer term supply of UK-qualified vets.

On the question of increasing the number of home-grown graduates, I am aware—the hon. Member for Ceredigion is too—that there are currently no university veterinary schools in Wales that are accredited by the RCVS. However, I am very pleased—I am sure that he is particularly pleased—that Aberystwyth University has been exploring possibilities for achieving such accreditation with the RCVS. A few years ago, a small number of universities had veterinary graduates or courses. That is gradually increasing, but I am very conscious of the substantial costs in creating new courses to achieve that. I really hope that this partnership, which Aberystwyth

University is progressing, succeeds. Encouraging more people into the veterinary profession is not a new issue, particularly into the farmed and agricultural environment, rather than the domestic animal environment, but together we recognise the challenges and we will keep working at it.

I am really grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter. It is a really important aspect of our withdrawal from the EU.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the Minister briefly comment on what the British Government are doing to work with European partners on disease surveillance post Brexit? At the moment, data can be shared across the EU. How will that function after Brexit, to ensure that our livestock are protected?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the laws we have in place and the reporting lines, although some of those might have a slightly different agency responsible for them straight after leaving the European Union. It is in our collective interest, where we want to have free and straightforward access to each other's markets, to continue that collaboration. I am not in a position to provide a detailed assessment of where that is, but in all the relationships I have had with EU member states, at ministerial and commissioner level, the issue of biosecurity and animal safety is absolutely paramount. I believe that there is good intent to ensure that some of those issues that could become a barrier do not do so. The hon. Gentleman might wish to contact Lord Gardiner in order to get further details on that issue.

In closing, I hope that the hon. Member for Ceredigion and the House recognise that the Government are focused on the issues, challenges and opportunities that the veterinary profession faces. I again thank him for bringing this important matter to Westminster Hall. I assure him that the Government are actively involved and committed to ensuring that these challenges will be addressed and resolved.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.

UK Digital and Tech Industries

[SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the UK digital and tech industries.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. This is an important debate on a sector of the economy that has been incredibly vital for this country and will become even more important in future. The UK's history as a global leader in technological and digital innovation is well known. From the invention of the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell in the 1800s, and the creation of the television by John Logie Baird in the 1920s, to the relatively recent introduction of the world wide web in 1989 by Tim Berners-Lee, the UK has always been at the forefront of technological advancement for the rest of the world. Today we continue to see incredible innovation and growth across the country, which puts the UK at the forefront of global technological advancement.

The turnover of digital and tech business in the UK has reached £170 billion. That is an increase of £30 billion over the past five years alone. We should recognise that the digital sector is creating jobs twice as fast as the non-digital sector. It is important to note that this is not just a London-centric industry, as many seem to think it might be. We have seen incredible growth in this sector all across the UK. There are digital clusters thriving in Belfast, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Newcastle, Cardiff and many other places in the UK. In mentioning all those regions, I thought that people from them might feel urged to jump up and say so. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will save his ammunition for later. We should welcome the huge growth in the number of individuals setting up businesses online, many from their own homes.

One of the many benefits of the digital industry is to take advantage of the opportunities for business and trade that exist online: the ability for people across the country, and the world, to be connected at just the press of a button. The aim of my speech is to push the Government for assurances that, alongside the recent digital strategy, we will continue to invest and encourage this sector of the economy to grow and, crucially, strive to be world leaders in this industry—tech UK.

Imagination Technologies in my constituency is at the cutting edge of this exciting sector. I visited its offices a couple of weeks ago and witnessed at first hand some of its fascinating, advanced work on computer chips and artificial intelligence. As I am sure the Minister knows, Imagination was recently acquired by Canyon Bridge, a US venture capital firm, for close to \$1 billion. That is \$1 billion of confidence invested in the UK. It is the largest such investment in UK tech since the referendum, so “Project Fear” should be well and truly dead. That was a huge investment of confidence in my constituency.

I am sure that the Minister will welcome that investment and the massive vote of confidence in the UK tech industry, and I hope that she will visit Imagination to see for herself this jewel in the tech crown. I extended that invitation to the Prime Minister at lunchtime, and she thought it a bit of a deviation from her way to Carlisle.

To save her from that deviation, I will say today that the Minister will be more than welcome to my constituency to see what the world can learn from St Albans.

There has been so much good news coming out of the tech industry in recent years and months. The UK ranked in the top three in KPMG's 2018 global technology innovation report. The report detailed the record level of venture capital investment into UK tech firms, which totals \$4 billion. That is more investment than the combined amounts in Germany, France, Spain and Ireland. The UK is mopping up more of that vital investment than those four countries combined. KPMG's report also highlighted the strength not just in large tech firm investment and growth in the UK, but in the investment going into emerging UK tech firms. However, we cannot rest on our laurels. We must see the UK emerge as the No. 1 location for global tech innovation in the near future—not just in the top three, but No. 1.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is remarkable and commendable that 99.8% of all new digital firms are small and medium-sized enterprises, and that this is a reflection of the organic strength in this space in the UK?

Mrs Main: I absolutely agree. We are having to look to a model where the great big factories and industries of the past are not necessarily going to be the voice of the future. Many of these companies are set up in people's bedrooms. Mark Zuckerberg might have a few issues of his own at the moment but, as he said, who would have thought three geeks in a bedroom would set up a company that would become so big? That is the future. Many of these companies start off small and then grow. That growth is part of the success, but also part of the issue that I want the Minister to address.

Funding Circle, a FinTech company founded in the UK, is another great example of success in the UK tech sector. Established in 2010, Funding Circle is now the world's largest lending platform for small businesses and has offices across Europe and in the United States. In such a short space of time it has come to be a global leader. Lending from Funding Circle loans has supported the creation of approximately 80,000 jobs in the UK. It is a wonderful example of the thriving FinTech industry that we now have.

Across Europe, the UK is leading the way. The latest European digital city index ranked London as No. 1 for supporting digital entrepreneurs. The UK is also No. 1 across Europe for inward investment into the digital sector. We should be incredibly proud of that. As we look to the future, the Government must do everything they can to support the continued growth of this industry. That includes listening to its concerns and planning for potential regulation.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The hon. Lady is painting a very rosy picture of the current situation. I suspect that she will soon move on to some of the challenges. As a representative of a city that is a well-known tech hub, I will just ask: does she agree that many of the people who work in the tech sector come from other countries, particularly European Union countries, and that it is important that the Government bring forward their proposals on migration and immigration as soon as possible so that we get some certainty for the future?

Mrs Main: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman about getting certainty on migration. Other companies I have spoken to recently say that they want to be able to bring in the brightest and the best. I absolutely understand that. Interestingly, many of the brightest and the best who are coming in, including Dr Li, who has taken over as the chief executive of Imagination Technologies, are from outside the European Union. Many are saying to me that they want a level playing field on the ability to bring in the brightest and the best, and not just because someone happens to have a blue passport. It is important that we recognise that this is a global industry with global resources that may wish to come to the UK.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to get our immigration strategy fit for purpose, but we also need to ensure that we have people in our own country who are entering the tech industry. Another company I visited in St Albans said that it was bringing in many highly qualified technicians. It had not employed a single person from the UK in the past three years. Why? Because it could not get them; they are in such demand. There are issues we need to address with ensuring that we are growing home talent for the future, as well as those around immigration. It is a double-sided issue that we need to be looking at.

These are some of the key priorities being raised by firms and trade associations in the industry. First, there is the adequacy agreement with the European Union as part of our future trading relationship. I do think that the future is rosy and bright, but no future, wherever we were, would not have its issues. The adequacy agreement is being asked for, and I would like the Minister's views on that. The free flow of data between the UK and the rest of the EU is extremely important to both sides during the negotiations. It is so clearly in everyone's interests for the flow of data to be unhindered, so that needs to be prioritised. I am sure it is being, but I would like to hear more about it from the Minister.

The implementation of the general data protection regulation in May and the Government's commitment to the framework is encouraging and must help the case for the adequacy agreement to be reached. I would also be pleased to hear what further work the Government are doing to ensure that the adequacy agreement will be reached as we leave the European Union. There will be serious concern among the tech industry if it is not batted down as an agreement that everyone has confidence in when we leave.

Secondly, companies stress the importance of access to talent for their industry, which goes back to what the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said. Of the 1.64 million jobs in the digital sector, about half a million are done by foreign-born employees. That means that half a million people are importing, so to speak, their talent into the UK tech industry. Even so, the industry demands more talent, which comes in through the tier 2 visa route, to support growing businesses that are looking for particular skills.

Many companies, including those in my constituency, report being extremely limited when trying to recruit talent from non-EU countries. This is a golden opportunity, despite Brexit being given a bad press—I hate the phrase “despite Brexit”—for us to craft an immigration policy that will not leave highly skilled jobs unfilled because of the difficulty of recruiting talented individuals from around the world.

As we leave the European Union, we will be able to set our own immigration policy, with fuller control over who can come into the country to work. The Government must ensure that any future immigration policy is agile and flexible to allow that international talent to come to the country and support growing industries, such as the tech sector. I would be glad to hear what preparations the Department has made to ensure that the tech sector can access that international talent after we leave the EU. Given that there are many small businesses in the tech sector, I would like to ensure that there is a conduit for their voices and concerns in future.

Finally, our education system is crucial to the future success of our tech and digital sectors. With the best will in the world, the brightest and best talent comes and wants to work in the UK tech sector, but I would also like our young people to want to join it—not to say it is not for them. It is important to welcome foreign talent, but we must grow our own.

Policy Exchange reported that 65% of today's students will end up working in jobs that do not even exist yet—that is 65% of future jobs that we cannot even imagine. By 2022, 500,000 highly skilled workers will be needed to fill digital roles, which is three times the number of UK computer science graduates in the past 10 years. That shows the amount of upskilling we have to do and the need to make tech a sector that our young people go into. That huge mismatch must be addressed.

Educators must provide children and young adults in the UK with the skills and training needed for the jobs of the future. We need a curriculum fit for the future, access to teaching staff to inspire our young people, and careers guidance that narrows the gender gap. Women and girls can and do flourish in the tech industry, but we need greater encouragement. When I visited Imagination Technologies, I asked a lady there how many women go into that sort of industry and she said, “Not enough.” It is not enough.

I am encouraged by recent Government announcements about the digital strategy and the Department for Education's announcement that a further £177 million will go into maths education, which is a crucial STEM subject for the jobs of the future. However, we need to do more to encourage our brightest and best to enter the world of teaching. Teaching is at the core; to get young people enthused and motivated, we must get the teachers in. There are some difficulties in recruiting teachers for certain subjects, and I would like to see a strategy to address that.

When I met Dr Li, the new chief executive of Imagination Technologies, he spoke about the significant support the industry receives in China. Rather cleverly, I said that we are in the top three, but China is No. 1. I will give hon. Members some reasons why—to say that the state is helping is to put it mildly. To promote talent in the industry and, crucially, to retain it, the Chinese Government provide subsidies for teaching tech subjects and offer financial incentives around pay and housing for those working in the sector. Although I am not advocating that approach, it shows that our competitors are determined to win the global tech race. They will not export their talent to other countries if they can possibly help it.

We need to ensure that tech UK is heading for the winning line, but with that exciting world of opportunity comes a dark side. Online security and safety are extremely

[Mrs Main]

important issues for the industry to deal with. The protection of the personal data that is being used by online companies is a current issue. For people to have confidence in the programs and applications they use, they need to know that their personal data is secure. I hope that the Government will continue to put pressure on companies to safeguard user data, and to consider how we can future-proof personal security and police industry behaviour.

UK businesses are increasingly subjected to cyber-security threats, which is another topical issue. A recent report by the National Cyber Security Centre found that more and more businesses are being threatened with data breaches, ransomware and cloud theft. Unfortunately, the criminals of this world—the malcontents and ne'er-do-wells—are one step ahead of the game. What are we doing to ensure that we are getting ahead of the game in cyber-security?

The growth of the internet of things, in which many household devices and other objects are interconnected, presents a worrying openness to hackers, as many of those devices lack even the most basic security defences. Some hon. Members will have seen the horrific case of a driverless car being hacked into. The idea that the machines could suddenly take over is horrific, but of course it is not the machines; it is the hackers behind the machines. The exploitation of data in attempts to influence other countries' elections is another current topic.

As we migrate more of our lives into the digital world, we need to ensure that rogue companies and rogue states are prevented from corrupt or sinister behaviour. I hope that the Minister will touch on what the Government are doing to strengthen our cyber-security and to increase public awareness about safety in a high-tech world.

The industry has incredible potential. Some recent technological advancements are staggering and the UK is proudly at the forefront of that success. On my visit to Imagination Technologies, it was inspiring to hear from those in the industry about how technology will improve our lives in future. The ability for artificial intelligence and the internet of things to combine to assist with healthcare and care for the elderly is especially exciting. Wearable tech will enable the user to be notified of potential health irregularities and will be able to alert medical services when a user's condition requires it. AI will also be able to help elderly people who need assistance with basic tasks, although there will never be a substitute for interaction with people.

To conclude, tech can improve our future lives in many ways: not just through healthcare or social connectivity, but by making everything in our lives easier. Tech UK is the future for us all. This country has an incredibly exciting digital industry and global Britain should strive to be not just in the top three, but No. 1.

2.47 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. When I mention my constituency of York, hopefully hon. Members think about the city walls, the minster, the Vikings—

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Steam trains!

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Chocolate!

Rachael Maskell: They are all on my list. I am glad hon. Members think about them, because we in York have a fantastic history, but York is also the UNESCO city of media arts. It is part of the Creative Cities Network and hosts the Mediale festival. It leads our country in the digital creative sector and has created the first guild of media arts—the first guild for 700 years. It is also home to the digital signalling centre, which is at the heart of the next generation of rail.

The film industry is on our doorstep with Screen Yorkshire. The British film industry is the UK's fastest growing sector, and Yorkshire leads the way. Our university is at the heart of that.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On the issue of the hon. Lady's constituency and elsewhere in the UK, does she agree that one of the potential beauties of the tech industry is that it is not confined to the UK's economic hotspots, such as the urban conurbations of London, Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff? It offers advantages to urban and rural areas, provided that the connectivity is there and the demand to promote the industry is met by the Government.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The digital and technological industries break boundaries in many ways, not least by providing alternative forms of employment. They certainly do not have any rules about where they are located. It is a 24/7 industry, so it includes individuals in their own homes and small businesses with global impacts. It is an exciting sector to be involved in.

The University of York is also at the cutting edge of digital technology and has its own digital creative labs, which I had the real pleasure of visiting earlier this year. I should say that I am on an apprenticeship with much of this, and I am learning: they are at the heart of the video-gaming industry, which has its home in York. Many businesses—start-up businesses, new companies, small tech companies—surround our city. We have 250 such businesses in York alone, and all that activity is building into the future of our economy, as we search for a new identity in a new era.

What also really excites me is that old is blending with new, as we move forward in our city. The new gives new opportunities. At the heart of our city, we have the biggest brownfield site in Europe, waiting for businesses to land. Rich heritage surrounds where people live. I say to any digital tech or digital creative company, "Come and see if your future is in York, and you will be most welcome to make it your home and make it your own".

As I have said, I am on a bit of an apprenticeship in this industry and I thank the Industry and Parliament Trust for giving me the opportunity to explore this sector—to have placements across the sector and to learn more about the cutting edge that the industry is providing our economy and our nation.

I have learned that our gaming industry is one of the fastest growing in the world because of the skills base that we are able to provide. The potential is huge if we really embrace that wider economic opportunity. In York itself, we are seeing how this industry—both alone

and standing alongside other industries—is so cross-cutting and how the skills acquired around video-gaming can then be applied right across the curriculum. Education is certainly at the forefront of that. I saw programmes that provided individualisation of tutoring. For instance, I undertook a French course; I will not say how I got on. Such programmes can track an individual's learning, taking them back over their weaknesses, improving their skills and ensuring that they are the best that they can be at that particular skill.

I also saw how the Yorkshire Museum has embraced virtual reality, to take visitors into a Viking village and enable them to experience life in that settlement. I saw 3D modelling technologies, pioneered in the games industry, that now help companies such as Rolls-Royce to design better engines. I saw artificial intelligence—machine learning—and how that work is advancing and the technology is progressing. This is in my city, this is in our country and we must be so proud of that.

The academic world around this work is so strong. Along with other cities, York hosts the Intelligent Games and Game Intelligence—IGGI, for short—programme, which hosts 60 PhD students. An absolutely global standard is being set around academia and looking at the future technologies that will drive our country's engine forward. Gaming will be really important to us, and not just for the sake of playing games; there is also the application of the skills that many people working in the industry will go on to develop.

What is going on before us—spread across the country, including in my city—is a quiet revolution that is transforming all our lives, with massive opportunities for the future of our country and my city. However, there are some issues that I want to talk about today. First of all, there is skills. We have good skills in our country, but we need some changes. The narrowing of the curriculum is not helping, particularly with regard to the digital creative sector. The arts have been downgraded and yet they could really be at the forefront. I ask the Minister to go back and have a look at that and make sure that the creative subjects are at the heart of our curriculum, too: it is when the technical and the creative join that we see this explosion of opportunity coming to our economy.

There are also the tech skills of kids to consider. We narrow people into boxes around a traditional learning curriculum, which is fit for a different era. We need to ensure that our children are embracing the new technologies of the future, because children are doing so elsewhere in the world and we really need to ensure now that we embed digital and technical skills right into the heart of our curriculum.

Liam Byrne: In the 19th century, it was the marriage of design and engineering brilliance in York that ensured it was the centre of the railway industry. Does my hon. Friend take inspiration from that?

Rachael Maskell: My right hon. Friend makes an absolutely excellent point, because that is our heritage—how we drove our economy forward through the Victorian years. We have that opportunity again today. The digital signalling centre in our city—the rail operating centre, or ROC, as it is called—is now at the heart of how trains are driven. They will not be driven in the cab of a train any more; the digital tech sector is now driving forward, so it is like having a train set in front of

a screen. That is completely radicalising the way that our country works. It is cutting-edge, 21st-century technology, and we have to see more of it in the future.

As I was saying, whether someone studies history, literature, medicine or maths, the digital and technical industries will play a vital role in their future. Just last week, I had the opportunity to take a tour of another York University department—the archaeological department. Archaeology digs into the past, but I also saw how the department is using technology to provide access to artefacts, by displaying them in a unique way, so that people can explore them and manipulate them on screen, to connect with artefacts dug up all over the world. They are put into context and it is possible to understand the history surrounding them: the experience was mind-blowing. That is because through technology the past has met the future, and there are very exciting opportunities in that regard.

The tech industry will also provide the breakthrough for telehealth, which will improve all our health. Again, I was exposed to some of those opportunities when I looked around the University of York, but so much more can be done, even when it comes to issues such as our mental health. We are massively struggling for resources in our health sector, including in mental health, so to have technology that can support us—technology can work against us, but also support us—and improve our wellbeing, we must embrace that technology as we move forward. It is so important that we consider the scope of where this technology is leading us and understand why the investment in our schools and education is so important.

I turn to research and innovation. We are talking about a very disparate sector, with lots of different companies scattered around. They do not have the capacity to build up much resource to get funding for research. We need to find a breakthrough on research, so that companies can network, to come together and draw down research funding, because we have a real future in this area, not least in the field of artificial intelligence, where we can really drive that technology forward. Of course, such technology is not about replacing humans; it is partly about doing things quicker, but also about pioneering breakthroughs in how we work. However, we need support for that.

I want the technology to have a social impact as well. York itself is brilliant in every stretch of the imagination, but it is also a very divided city. Some of the most deprived areas in the country are in my city and we are seeing exclusion being built in around it. I ask the Minister to consider whether the digital and tech sectors can be used to reduce the inequality in our country, not only through opportunities and skills but through the outcomes that the sector can bring. For me, that will be the win-win of the sector.

Finally, I want to say that the arts enrich all of us. In closing, I want to talk about Mediale 2018. Will the Minister meet me to discuss it? It will run from 27 September to 6 October, and it will be the nation's creative digital festival. It is a platform for innovative art and technology, showing what can be done in this modern age, providing art to everyone as an enhancing experience. Mediale will be a springboard for this sector of our economy and how the arts are projected across our country, blending the old and the new. I am sure the Minister will want to ensure that the sector has a major footprint not only in York, but in the whole nation.

3 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for calling this important debate. I will talk briefly, but first I want to put in context the importance of the digital sector to our country's economic output. We must bear in mind that the digital industries make up 4% of all employment and 7% of economic output, which is remarkable and represents remarkable growth in recent times.

One successful growth story is UKCloud, a very large company in my constituency. Just a few years ago, it was a start-up of six people. Under the amazing leadership of Simon Hansford, it has grown to now employ nearly 200 people. This month, it will take on another 50 employees. It has been remarkably successful, and it represents some of the recent explosive growth we have seen across the sector. As the name would suggest, UKCloud is a cloud storage business. It has successfully delivered cloud solutions for: central Government, including the Cabinet Office, the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence and other bodies of Government such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs; many local authorities; health organisations; and other private businesses.

UKCloud's unique offer is that it can scale up and compete with large multinationals. The offer is extremely cost-effective, so it can punch above its weight. That has come about as a direct result of the Government's drive to open up cloud procurement through G-Cloud. I am sure the Minister will agree in her closing remarks that that has been a commendable success in encouraging British small and medium-sized enterprises to get into that space, punch above their weight and compete with the large multinationals.

Another significant thing about UKCloud is that it has a very important offer when it comes to national security. This year it is establishing a high-assurance cloud platform, which will basically be a secret facility known as UKCloudX. It will enable the Government to fulfil an important intelligence function, which is the ability to share intelligence across a number of different Government bodies and achieve the doctrinal intent of fusion. It is all very well when different intelligence agencies or bodies have information and intelligence, but unless they can share and fuse it in a highly secret manner, the intelligence cannot achieve its best effect in support of our national security.

UKCloudX is an important development, which has a direct impact on our national security at the highest level. I am delighted that that work will be taking place in Farnborough this year. No one in this room needs reminding of the importance of this country's having a cutting-edge approach to the handling of intelligence and data, given the recent domestic challenges we have faced with our national security in Manchester with the atrocity just a year ago and the recent developments in Salisbury. UKCloud is playing an important role in our national security.

The other important aspect is data sovereignty. Due to recent developments, especially with regard to Facebook, which has already been mentioned today, the importance of the secure handling of data is clear to us all. Whether it is Government data or the personal data of citizens,

the way that is handled and the total control we need to have over that to guarantee security are of the utmost importance. Data sovereignty should be a strand that runs through the Government's approach to the industry as a whole, but particularly when it comes to the procurement of cloud storage facilities. I would be grateful for the Minister's reassurance that when the Government consider procuring future cloud storage for their work, they will guard against any tendency to prefer US hyperscale offers—the big US providers—and instead prefer British SMEs, which not only offer 100% data sovereignty, but also offer the immediate economic benefit of the jobs and growth we have discussed today. I commend the Government for their attitude in terms of the G-Cloud, which has been a great success, but I would welcome the Minister's reassurance on preferring UK SMEs in procurement.

Various invitations have been mentioned today. The Minister would not forgive me if I sat down without warmly extending an invitation to her to visit Farnborough and UKCloud. It is extremely convenient, being just off junction 4 of the M3. I am sure we can provide a very good lunch. I know she does not need that kind of incentive, however, because her commitment to her brief is such that she will want to see things at first hand. On that note, I conclude my remarks.

3.7 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh, and to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate and on passionately setting out the issues that we all subscribe to and wish to speak about.

The UK's digital tech industry turned over an estimated £170 billion in 2015 and is growing at twice the rate of the rest of the economy. It is key to boosting the UK's wider economy, making a contribution of £97 billion in 2015. The hon. Lady clearly set out the situation in relation to the digital tech industry. She was confident on the way forward and Brexit. I will be equally confident, and I also want to say a wee bit about what we have done back home, which has been excellent for job creation and for boosting our local economy.

The digital tech industry generated a further 85,000 jobs between 2014 and 2015, going from 1.56 million jobs to 1.64 million. It is creating jobs at double the rate of the rest of the economy. That indicates how important the sector is. All the contributions so far have mentioned that, and I am sure those who follow will do the same. Since 2012, there has been a 13% increase in the advertised salaries of digital tech posts, compared with only a 4% rise in those of non-digital jobs. Tech investment in the UK reached £6.8 billion in 2016, which is more than two times higher than any other European country and significantly more than its closest rival, France, which secured some £2.4 billion of investment. That is about a third as much, which indicates the strength of our digital tech industry.

"Tech Nation 2017" shows that the average advertised salary for digital tech jobs has now reached just over £50,000 a year, compared with £35,000 for the average non-digital salary, making it 44% higher than the national average. Again, not only are we creating jobs; we are creating well-paid jobs. Along with the well-paid jobs we have to provide the quality employee as well.

As a Northern Ireland MP, I look to the Minister, who I know has a particular interest in this subject, not just because she is a Minister but because she has a personal interest. I am sure the replies to our queries and questions will be positive, as I am sure the shadow Minister will think of some similar things to say as well. Tech City UK's "Tech Nation 2016" report found that the digital and tech sector in Northern Ireland was burgeoning, and outside of London and the south-east made the largest contribution to the regional economy.

Mrs Main: The real purpose of this debate is to show that although London is key in many eyes, it is not a bar to young people finding work because they can find such high-paid jobs in their own areas, and that is really exciting.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is tremendously exciting. I discussed it with Invest Northern Ireland, which was given the task of finding new jobs. One of the things that it was able to describe—I will come to this shortly—was the quality of graduates that we have in Northern Ireland, which is one of the attractions of Northern Ireland. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that people do not have to go to London to get a big wage. They go for different reasons, whatever they may be, but people can have a job back home and they can stay there. That is what it makes it so exciting.

In the words of my party colleague, Simon Hamilton, in his role as Economy Minister:

"From the North West Science Park in Londonderry through to the Enterprise Zone in Coleraine and down to Newry, the home of some of our leading high-tech companies, with Belfast—Europe's leading destination city for new software development projects—at its heart, bit by bit we are building a Northern Ireland-wide tech industry that we can be proud of."

That is what we are doing in Northern Ireland, and that is what we hope to continue over the next period of time.

In Belfast and other cities in Northern Ireland, global tech names such as Citi and Allstate, working in the sector with Silicon Valley firms such as BDNA, are all recognisable. Each of us here will speak passionately about our own constituencies, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) did, and as other Members will as well. As MPs we love our constituencies and want to do the best for them, so the opportunities need to be there. Not only is our highly skilled workforce attracting global investment, but we have indigenous tech firms such as Kainos, Novosco and First Derivatives growing in size and becoming global leaders in our region of Northern Ireland. We can be excited about what is happening across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As I often say to my hon. Friends in the Scottish National party, "Better together": all the four regions doing all the same things together day by day and making things better for everyone, and we should continue to do that.

It is clear that much of our attraction is the skills base supported by international-standard research facilities, such as the Centre for Secure Information Technologies at Queen's and Ulster's Intelligent Systems Research Centre: education and big business working together. We have done that very well through Queen's University. The Minister might respond to that because that is a key factor to our moving forward. We will have the

education, the big business, the opportunities, the quality of graduates and all those things together. We have a range of support and programmes in place, such as StartPlanet NI and Propel, aimed in particular at early stage and high potential technology-based start-ups. Perhaps most crucially, we have a fast developing ecosystem including the likes of Catalyst Inc., Digital DNA and Immersive Tech NI, which combine to create a vibrant tech community across Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland is consistently the top-performing region of the UK in national exams at age 16 and 18. The fact is that we have the graduates. People want to stay and the technical and digital firms want to invest because the skills base is there. We have the highest percentage of qualified IT professionals in the UK and Ireland, with more than 77% holding a degree-level qualification. I say respectfully to all the other regions that Northern Ireland as a region is leading the way—from a small base of 1.8 million people, we are up there with London and other parts of the United Kingdom. Some 77% of high school graduates, post A-level, go on to further and higher education compared with the UK average of 71%.

Government, industry and academia have implemented collaborative initiatives in training and education, such as cyber and data analytics academies, to ensure that the workforce continues to meet the needs of the global ICT industry with competitive salary costs, low employee attrition rates and lower operating costs, including low property costs. All those things make it attractive to come to Northern Ireland. Labour and property costs for a 200-person software development centre in Belfast are 36% less than in Dublin, 44% less than in London and 58% less than in New York. It is clear that we are an attractive place to do business and we must sell that more globally.

I will conclude with this, Ms McDonagh. I am conscious of time and there are two others to follow me. I read an interesting article in the *Belfast Telegraph* in which David Crozier, part of the commercial team at CSIT, was quoted. I want to cite his comments because it is important to have them on the record. He said:

"Belfast has a strong hi-tech industry as it is and cyber security is a subsection of that so you have transferable skills in terms of software engineering roles that can transfer over into cyber security. We're working towards a target of about 5,000 jobs by 2026."

While other sectors are facing uncertainty following Brexit, Mr Crozier is bullish about its impact on cyber-security investment:

"It's really high-value stuff, companies have a demand for it globally and to a certain extent that does make it"—

I use these words; I know the hon. Member for St Albans will be happy—

"Brexit proof."

We are looking forward to good times.

"It's not going to have a detrimental effect for sure, it may actually lead to more demand if you see a hardening of UK national positions around trade tariffs and those sort of things that's naturally going to drive investment into types of technologies to protect sensitive information, sensitive networks. It possibly produces even greater opportunity."

An industry that is yet again embracing the opportunity Brexit presents, an industry that is able to compete globally, is an industry that we must invest heavily into, and the benefits will be deeply beneficial. Brexit-proof: what could be a better reason than that?

3.16 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): It is my absolute pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship today, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate. I declare my interest, as set out in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The United Kingdom punches above its weight in the global digital marketplace, with £170 billion of turnover and £7 billion of tech investment—twice the amount of any other country in the European Union. However, as we have heard, this is not just about profits; it is also about good-quality jobs, with the average advertised salary for a digital job 44% higher than for a non-digital average. That benefit is shared by an enormous 1.6 million workers in the UK's digital sector, and it is a benefit shared by those seeking work, either young people or those in retraining, to get access to higher pay and higher quality jobs.

Such jobs are good, but much more needs to be done both on gender equality and class inequality in the technology and digital sectors, with many start-up businesses pioneered by those with the safety net of a family who can provide for them when inevitable failures occur. I do not criticise them for having that safety net, but the stark reality in my constituency of Bristol North West is that I have some of the most affluent and some of the most economically deprived suburbs in the city right next door to each other. Many of the young people have fantastic ideas but are not confident enough to take on the risk to try them. We need to try to find solutions to ensure that there is an equality of access to the opportunities and excitement of the digital market.

As we have seen recently, there are still gender inequality issues in some aspects of the technology and digital marketplace, so gender bias is as important an issue in this space as it is in others. I absolutely agree with the comments made today about the digital skills needed for young people. It is also important to show why the basics around science, maths and English can lead to such exciting jobs so that young people can see what they are aiming for and understand why getting that maths GCSE, which they might find slightly boring at the time, is a really exciting route through to some fantastic jobs. It is also about reskilling. An example that I gave in the House in the debate on autonomous vehicles was about when all of our taxis become driverless taxis and we have a load of taxi drivers who will need to find new work. This is not just about young people; it is about reskilling older people to access the marketplace.

On the whole, the Bristol and Bath region does really well. We have £8 billion of digital turnover. We had 87% growth from 2011 to 2015, which now accounts for 35,000 jobs in our region in the west of England. That is an enormous part of our economy. I will take this opportunity to pay tribute to the likes of the Engine Shed, TechSPARK, Business West and others in Bristol who have been pioneering for many years.

One key aspect of driving the regional presence is access to finance. That has been one of our problems in Bristol, which it has been getting better at. However, start-ups that want to scale up and get financial backing through serious funding and other avenues still need to come and have a presence in London. The networking that they need to do is in London. The people who have done this and know how to do it are in London. In my

view, we need Government action to take that knowledge and experience out to the regions so that companies are able not only to start up in incubator spaces, but to scale up their businesses in the region.

That is why our industrial strategy is important, and why significant efforts should be made not just in relation to the vast productivity gains that digitisation can make, and not just in the digital economy, but in standard industries and public services. There is also a need to continue to push the benefit out to the regions, creating incentives and environments that allow digital businesses to start and be staffed. Opportunities to work in those businesses are important, given the skills deficit outside London and the major conurbations. That cannot just mean DFLs—"down from Londons." Bristol is pleased to welcome, on average, 80 families a week from London. It causes a bit of an issue with house prices, but apart from that they are very welcome. But we must remember that young people born and raised in Bristol, and especially in Bristol North West, need access to those jobs too.

There is no denying that London benefits from being the digital capital of Europe. That position is put at risk by the Government's approach to Brexit. Our access to talent from across the European Union, the attractiveness of London and other parts of England as a place to call home, our access to capital through our dominance in financial services, and the regulatory harmony and access to the European single market that come with being able to sell digital goods and services to one of the largest trading blocs in the world, are all potentially being thrown to the wind by the Brexit strategy, which is a great shame. The digital single market that the European Union is pushing is part of that situation. It will take time to resolve, but it will be a lost opportunity if we do not have access to it, through at least maintaining our position in the single market and customs union.

On the disagreeable basis that we leave the European Union entirely, we must turn our minds to maintaining Britain's digital strength in a global digital marketplace post Brexit. In many other areas of industry, such as law, which was my profession before I became a politician, Britain has a reputation around the world for playing a fair game, with clear rules and enforcement. That is a British brand that is trusted and reliable. Britain is renowned as a country that people want to come to in order to do business and reduce risk—and, as I said, to get access to the European Union. We should seek to build that recognition in our digital marketplace too. Our historic geopolitical position between the United States and the European Union will be relevant to the digital market. As we have seen from the Senate hearings on Cambridge Analytica and Facebook, United States legislators are now looking to the European Union to see how to regulate technology and digital business.

That is an area where British MEPs and British commissioners and staff have played an important role in defining such things as the general data protection regulation, the network and information security directive, and components of the digital single market. In building that trusted global brand as the best country in which to start and run digital businesses, we now need to be much clearer about how we will apply the old rules in the new, modern digital world—how we will protect consumers who are buying goods and services that are digital.

We have made good progress, in the Consumer Rights Act 2015 and the implementation of European legislation such as the digital content directive, but there is more to do, not least with respect to making citizens and consumers aware of what is happening, and their rights, and how we regulate dominant companies in uncompetitive marketplaces. In the old world of utilities there are regulators to ensure consumer fairness. In the new world of the ownership and control of data Ofcom plays an enforcement role, but what is the competition role in that space? That is something we need to talk about more. We also need to deal with how we guarantee old civil liberties in a modern setting, including the role of the state and public services, the use of big data, and ensuring the cyber-security that we have heard about today.

That is why yesterday I was thrilled to kick off a scoping event, here at the House of Commons, on a new parliamentary commission on technology ethics, building on the work of colleagues in the other place—the report of the Lords Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence came out this week and it is very good. The Minister's new data ethics body in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is excitedly anticipated. Also there are issues such as the control, security and monetisation—with patient consent—of assets such as NHS data sets, as identified by Sir John Bell in the life sciences industrial strategy as new ways of funding public services.

Working with the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), my Conservative co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on data analytics—the parliamentary internet, communications and technology forum—and others, we shall engage with all stakeholders externally, and with the Minister and her Department, to create an environment in the United Kingdom that is good for digital businesses and consumers in the digital world, and hopefully a beacon for best practice around the world. There is a balance to get right, between the vast opportunities that come with driverless vehicles, the internet of things and digital public services, and the risks. It will be important to build trust with consumers and citizens, partners around the world, and businesses, to create a digital economy in the UK that we can all be proud of.

3.25 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this important debate.

A couple of months ago I was in this Chamber debating ethics and artificial intelligence, and I suggested a code of ethics for people working in data, perhaps to be named the Lovelace code of ethics. I was delighted, two months later, to see that the Nuffield Foundation recently set up an Ada Lovelace Institute to look into data ethics. That is a think-tank with £5 million of investment, so I have new respect for the power and reach of Westminster Hall debates.

I was also delighted to see the House of Lords report on artificial intelligence on Monday. It is right for Parliament to discuss those new technological frontiers. In fact, they should be at the forefront of our debates. I want to touch briefly on data, accountability, skills and inequality. There is a huge issue about who owns our data.

The new general data protection regulation is welcome in helping to give consumers control. When I was Consumer Affairs Minister, a fledgling project called “midata” was all about the principle that people's data should be their own; if they wanted it from companies, they should be able to get access to it in a machine-readable format, so that it could be used for their benefit.

The world has obviously moved on somewhat in five years, and that was a fledgling effort, but the issue of data as currency will become more important in years to come. The Consumer Rights Act 2015 recognised that data could be treated as consideration: if someone had exchanged their data to get a product, they should still have some consumer rights and protections, for example if the product damaged their equipment. The business models that we are talking about in the tech sector require a greater level of consumer choice and transparency about the transaction that people make when they hand over data. The current model is one where people give their data away willy-nilly for free services, often with little control for the individual. In the future, initiatives such as private data accounts could be a mechanism giving people more control over their data. I am interested not just in whether the public sector can monetise large data sets, but in whether individuals might be in a position to have their own data monetised much more explicitly.

As for accountability, there have been all sorts of scandals, from fake news to online abuse, and the polarisation of debate coming from social media companies. Yet Facebook is only 13 years old, and Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram are all younger, so perhaps it is no surprise that innovation has outstripped regulation in that area. However, those platforms are changing much about society and need to be held to account. Many of those companies have huge monopoly power, and the network effect makes that almost automatic and inevitable for new platforms that are set up, but I do not think the Competition and Markets Authority has yet grappled sufficiently with the issues. The European Commission is perhaps one of the few organisations to have been able properly to stand up to those corporate giants, whether on tax, data issues or competition.

We need to do more about skills, in schools and through retraining. I agree with the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) about diversity in the technology workforce and that situation leading to bizarre decisions, because it is even less representative than most other sectors. I also agree about constraints on skilled workers coming to the UK. That is a problem that I fear will get worse after Brexit. We have just seen the cap for tier 2 visas for skilled workers from outside the European Economic Area and Switzerland reached for an unprecedented fourth month in a row. Until last December, that quota had been reached only once. There is concern about whether companies in the UK can get the skills they need. I declare an interest as a very minor shareholder of a data start-up, Clear Returns, on whose board I served while I was out of Parliament. I can attest, from that experience, to how difficult it is for tech companies to get access to the skills of data scientists and analysts that they need.

Finally—I am conscious of the time, Ms McDonagh—I want to speak about inequality. Inequality in technological skills needs to be addressed, as does inequality in access to broadband in different parts of the country. I am still

[Jo Swinson]

astonished that a new development in my constituency, which was built in the last few years in Woodilee, does not have adequate broadband. That was entirely predictable, and I have written to Ministers about it. There is also a wider issue of the huge opportunities that technology provides for solving problems in society, and the real risk that that will entrench existing inequalities, particularly economic ones. If we do not do something about it, those with capital to invest in tech companies will be those who reap the rewards. Instead, we should be using automation to take drudgery out of jobs and strenuous heavy lifting out of the care sector, so that we leave more time for humanity and for those job areas to which we as individuals can contribute with creativity and higher skills.

We must also allow people to build more relationships outside work. Given the way that taxation works with the larger, global tech companies, and the way that the benefits will be accrued, I fear that we could risk driving serious increases in inequality, and that those who lose out by losing their jobs will not be compensated in appropriate ways. That risks division in wider society more generally.

I know that we have little time in this debate, so I will bring my remarks to a close, but I hope I have flagged up some key issues that the House will return to when discussing these matters, which I hope we will do more often in future.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I will now call the Front-Bench speakers. If they each speak for eight or nine minutes, that will allow Mrs Main some time to sum up the debate.

3.31 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McDonagh.

I must congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on three things. First, I congratulate her on securing a debate on this important topic. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) is right to say that we do not speak enough about this issue, and we need a lot more discussion about the sector in this place. Secondly, I am pleased that the hon. Member for St Albans began her history of creative thinking in the UK by mentioning two Scotsmen: Alexander Graham Bell and John Logie Baird. Thirdly, I congratulate her on securing a debate on the future of the digital and tech industries while Cambridge Analytica and its various chums are busy whirling away, trying to pretend that there is nothing to see, and Mr Zuckerberg is singing “*je ne regrette rien*”. I am in awe of that forward planning, and I congratulate her most heartily on that.

The hon. Lady mentioned the spread of digital clusters around the UK. I welcome that, and it was excellent to hear about various cities, such as York, that contain those important clusters. There is still a considerable concentration of elements of the sector in London and the south of England, however, and I hope that is noted by the Minister and the continuing pull to that area resisted; the substantial benefits of this industry must be shared around the nations and regions of the UK. We boast tremendous talent, and opportunities need to follow.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the importance of the free flow of data between the UK and Europe in the forthcoming negotiations, the express desire of companies in the tech sector for access to international talent, and the part that the immigration system must play in that. Topically, she also mentioned cyber-security and education—a few Members have said how essential it is for STEM subjects to be pushed to the forefront, and I commend the Scottish Government for their STEM strategy, which is now starting to reap some benefits.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) made a tremendous contribution and mentioned many things that I did not know about York. I knew some of them—I have been there—but the fact that it is UNESCO city of media arts was news to me. She spoke at length about many exciting developments in her constituency. For me, however, the most important part of her contribution was her talk of that essential marrying of creative arts and technology.

I once sat on the board of Creative Edinburgh, an umbrella organisation for creative industries in Edinburgh, and that point was made time and again: one cannot have a computer game, for example, that people want to play if the story is boring. The contribution of writers is essential, and creative thinking is so important in those industries. We must remember that and be clear that neglecting the arts is very short-sighted when trying to push the sector forward. The hon. Lady also touched on telehealth and the importance of inclusiveness in the development of the tech sector, and I entirely agree.

The hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty)—he is no longer in his place—reminded us of the explosion of growth in this sector, and it still staggers me when I reflect on that. I hate to age myself, but to someone whose house possessed only a small black and white TV for most of their formative years, the sort of digitech on offer today is still a little mind blowing. He emphasised the importance of security, particularly with cloud storage facilities, which is certainly worth noting.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave his constituency an impressive plug, as always, and mentioned the high quality and pay of the jobs on offer in this sector. I recently visited two cyber-security firms in my constituency. They moved there not simply because of the lower living costs that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, but because of access to high-quality graduates from Edinburgh's variety of universities, and in particular the informatics centre at Edinburgh University. They also spoke about the shortage of qualified graduates across the UK, and the fact that as a result, salaries in the sector are higher than average and conditions are excellent. We must make more of that to our young people when they are choosing what professions they wish to enter.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) spoke about the extra support needed for equality of access, which is important, and about the equality of opportunity that must be made available to everyone. He also mentioned STEM subjects, and reminded us of the importance of reskilling employees—the Scottish Affairs Committee also considered that in some depth in our most recent inquiry into future work practices in Scotland. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire mentioned the transactional nature of data, which was extremely interesting, and raised the possibility of private data accounts, which is certainly worth considering. She also spoke of innovation outstripping regulation.

Let me return to my important point about Cambridge Analytica, Mr Zuckerberg, and so on. It is natural that people's suspicions rise when they hear of potentially nefarious deeds and the questionable morals of companies operating in that sector, but we must take time to remember that good things also come from the digital and tech sector, and that they outweigh the bad. Even the bad lads have done many good things: Facebook helps to keep families and friends in touch across oceans and continents, for example, and it is one of the few things for which I do not have to ask my daughters for advice on how it works.

Youngsters are, of course, far ahead of the game when it comes to dealing with new technology—that has been the case since a woman invented the wheel—and we look to them for much of what we understand about how the sector will develop. I often worry that many younger folk do not appreciate how often they are the product rather than the consumer in the virtual world, and I am concerned that many do not appreciate the dangers of sharing too much of their lives online. Why would they? They are young, and I suppose they can get old and cynical in their own time.

The public alarm often raised about how our youngsters interact with IT is that too often they are closeted in their bedrooms playing games on the computer. Adults previously worried about TV, rock music, radio—in my father's case, his father worried about him listening to jazz—and, for all we know, books. Although we should take such concerns on board, it should not make us believe that video or computer games—I will focus on them, although I am not always certain of the terminology—are, in and of themselves, bad or corrupting. Scotland has a vibrant computer gaming industry, and my constituency boasts not only creative incubators and tech centres for digitech companies, but a number of people employed in the computer gaming industry. We can be sure that they have been in frequent touch.

The creativity involved in making a game is intensive. It is no longer just the classic "space invaders", and it involves multi-disciplinary working. Someone writes that music, someone creates those images, someone programmes the game, and someone writes the storylines, as I mentioned. That is an industry that grew itself. It has simply moved too fast over the years for the Government to catch up. Government can at times be quite glacial; the IT sector is the river rapids.

I had imagined, before I found out more about the industry, the average "gamer", as I have heard players are called, to be a child, adolescent, teenager or—at most—a young adult. In fact, it is common for all those whippersnappers under 50 to be gamers, and not even uncommon for crumbling MPs such as many of us to be engrossed by such games. We all have a stake now that gaming is a cultural norm. I have been told that the phenomenon is almost global. The opportunities are immense, and it is time for the Government to catch up with the industry.

Video games tax relief has helped to advance some parts of the sector, but it has given an advantage to the larger studios at the expense of smaller and more innovative ones, which have closed in recent years. I would like to see that reversed. It is perhaps time to look at expanding the tax relief and offering upfront funding, even in the form of loans, to help games development. I encourage the Minister to address some of those points in her response.

3.41 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing the debate.

I recognise the enormous progress that many of us have celebrated this afternoon, but I want to sound a note of warning about becoming complacent. For all the progress that we have talked about in our constituencies and around the country, the truth is that, across the horizon, others are moving much faster. We have heard about some of the big technology firms that are troubling us from the west coast of the United States, but look east, to Alibaba, Tencent, and Baidu.

Look at the fact that China is now not only the country that invented paper currency, but will soon become the first cashless society, where everybody pays for everything on WeChat. That country is now backed by the biggest science spend on Earth. There are countries around the world moving much faster than us, and if we want to ensure that this great superpower of the steam age does not become an also-ran in the cyber age, the Government will need to make a number of important policy reforms and changes of direction, three of which I will touch on very quickly.

First, we have to ensure that the digital economy in this country has a much more robust foundation of trust. Trust is the foundation of trade; it always has been and always will be. However, as we have seen in the debate surrounding Cambridge Analytica and Facebook, that trust is evaporating very quickly, which is why we need a clear statement of principles and a clear Bill of digital or data rights for the 21st century.

The truth is that we are going into a period of rapid regulation and re-regulation. That is perfectly normal and sensible. There was not just one Factory Act during the course of the 19th century; there were 17. We regulated again and again as the technology and the economics of production changed. That is what we are about to do in this country, yet if we do not have a clear statement of principles, that regulation will be difficult for anybody, frankly, to anticipate.

It should not simply be about our rights as consumers; it should be, as the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) said, about basic equalities. In South Korea, they want to use wearable technology to increase life expectancy by three years. How do we ensure that those new privileges are not simply the preserve of those who can afford the technology? How do we ensure that we democratise both the protections that we need and the progress that we want to share? That is why a Bill of digital rights is so important.

It is important that the Government pick up on one crucial component of trust: the electronic ID system—a public choice for EID—that we currently lack. At the moment, public data is scattered between the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, the Passport Office, the Department for Work and Pensions, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and the Government Gateway, which I see the Minister's Department has now claimed. At the moment, that information is so disjointed that we cannot use it as citizens to create a secure public EID system, as they have done in Estonia. That has been the key to Estonia's creation of 3,000 public e-services and 5,000 private e-services. It is the foundation of what is

[Liam Byrne]

now the most advanced digital society on Earth. The Government need to put in place those important foundations of trust.

The second point is on infrastructure. It is not just here in the Houses of Parliament where the digital infrastructure is appalling. I do not know about you, Ms McDonagh, but I certainly cannot get a mobile signal in my office, on the fifth floor of Portcullis House, and I know that frustration is widely shared, but it is not just a problem here. In fact, the areas of this country that Brexit will hit hardest are those where download speeds are slowest. The parts of the country that will be hurt most by Brexit are therefore the least prepared to prosper in the new digital society that we are all so much looking forward to.

Other countries are racing ahead of us in terms of the targets that they are putting in place for broadband access. I was privileged to visit South Korea last week, where they have 60% fibre to the premises. What is it here in Britain? It is 3%. Not only do they have much greater penetration of fibre than we do, they have not one but three mobile networks delivering 100% broadband access, and they will commercialise 5G not in 2020, but this year. That is why the Government should be far more ambitious about universal service obligation for broadband access. We proposed 30 megabits per second, and proposed putting £1.6 billion behind that. The Government should be more ambitious than they are today. We will soon go to consultation on what it would take in terms of public investment to commercialise widespread 5G. We hope that the Government will look closely at our results.

Jim Shannon: Through the confidence and supply arrangement that the Democratic Unionist party made with the Conservative party, we secured £150 million for broadband to take us up to that level, so we can continue to be the leader in regions across the whole of the United Kingdom for economic development and delivery.

Liam Byrne: Well, lucky you! If the west midlands had enjoyed a per capita bung on the same level as Northern Ireland, an extra £600 million would be coming into my region; I know I am not the only one to look at the deal that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues skilfully struck with some jealousy.

The final component is skills. My hon. Friends the Members for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) made brilliant speeches about the importance of skills. I come from the city that is home to Soho House. Soho Manufactory was the first great factory, built in 1766. People have heard, of course, of James Watt, but many forget Matthew Boulton. It was Boulton who put together not only the best engineers in the world, but the best designers in the world. Where did he get them from? He brought engravers and artists from France, Germany and central Europe. That was the strength of the business; it married design brilliance and technical brilliance.

What do we have today, 250 years later? In Jaguar Land Rover, we have a company producing vehicles where the infotainment system is now worth more than the engine. Design brilliance and technical excellence need to go together, but design brilliance is being smashed

out of the curriculum at the moment. I speak as a father of a boy going through his GCSEs, so I see it first-hand when I go home.

Young people are at the sharp end of the jobs risk of automation—that was confirmed by the International Monetary Fund yesterday, and by the OECD a week or two ago. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West mentioned, older workers are also crucial. By the age of 52, a working-class man in this country has paid £103,000 in national insurance. What happens if he loses his job? He gets sent down the job centre like everybody else, with no extra help, retraining or reskilling for the digital economy. Yet this is the country of the Open University, the Workers' Educational Association, Unionlearn, and great education entrepreneurs such as Dr Sue Black and Martha Lane Fox. We should be bringing those players together to create a different kind of lifelong learning for the 21st century.

This is a nation of scientific genius. We have been burying our sovereigns with our scientists since we interred Isaac Newton over the road in Westminster abbey. We are the only country in the world that could make films about great scientists such as Turing and Hawking. We are the nation of the industrial revolution, but if we do not change course soon, this foundation of the industrial revolution will not be the leader in the fourth industrial revolution.

3.49 pm

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate and on her interesting, comprehensive and inspiring speech. The impact of the digital and tech industries on the UK economy is a vast subject. I will try to respond to as many points as possible.

We heard from many Members about the staggering growth and exciting opportunities that the sector offers our country. The digital economy here is growing 32% faster than the wider economy. I took note of the statistics that my hon. Friend quoted about her constituency. St Albans has access to more than 400,000 digital and tech jobs in and around the surrounding areas and clusters. She mentioned Imagination Technologies in Kings Langley. I am delighted to accept her invitation to visit it to learn more about that exciting new company.

In March 2017 we published our digital strategy, which set out the key pillars of a healthy ecosystem for technology. The foundations can be met when we achieve nationwide access to world-class digital infrastructure. Although London is the capital of European tech investment, almost 70% of that investment is in regional clusters outside London. I find that an encouraging statistic.

In the Budget, we unlocked more than £20 billion of capital funding for digital enterprises through the enterprise investment scheme and the British Business Bank. I very much take on board the point, raised by the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), that it has been easier for start-ups or scale-ups to raise capital if they are located in London. We want to build on that for the regions, so that SMEs no longer have to keep coming to London to raise capital. We announced a further £4.7 billion for the national productivity investment fund, which will benefit the sector, and £75 million of investment to take forward recommendations following

the independent review on artificial intelligence and the artificial intelligence grand challenge, which was announced in the industrial strategy.

Several Members mentioned the huge importance of data ethics. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) mentioned the debate that she secured a few months ago. I hope the newly announced centre for data ethics and innovation will have discussions with the Nuffield Foundation and will benefit from its Ada Lovelace centre for ethics. Such measures are vital to ensure public trust, which, as the shadow Minister said, is a vital plank of success.

A number of hon. Members mentioned cyber-security and safety. The safety of our citizens and businesses is absolutely crucial. There is an increasing number of risks, which can have damaging implications, as we live and operate online. The digital charter aims to increase public confidence and trust in new technologies and create the best possible basis on which the digital economy can thrive.

Our work on keeping the UK's cyber-space safe is clear. As we stated in the "Internet Safety Strategy" Green Paper, what is unacceptable offline should be unacceptable online. I look forward to bringing forward the response to that consultation in the next month or two. All users should be empowered to manage online risks and stay safe. Technology companies have a responsibility to their users. We fully understand that it is vital to have strong data protection laws and appropriate safeguards in that area to enable businesses to operate across international borders, as well as empowering citizens with full control over their personal data.

Several hon. Members mentioned digital skills, which are crucial, particularly as we approach Brexit. We need to build a digital economy that works for everyone, and we can do that only if we equip people with the skills that are needed. We are not only looking at training and skills in schools and among the older population, but we want to maintain our position as a go-to country for new talent, so we announced a doubling of the number of tier 1 exceptional talent visas last year. We have introduced an entitlement for adults who lack basic digital skills to enable them to undertake fully funded basic digital skills training from 2020.

I was struck by the statistic about salary levels that the hon. Member for Bristol North West offered. He said that in the digital sector people can expect to be paid 44% more than the average for other employment. We want to open that up. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) also made the point that the tech and digital sector can be a great force for social mobility, but only if we ensure that everybody has access to skills training.

Hon. Members talked about young people. We have a big commitment in schools, and we have the benefit of corporate support for our programme of education. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the importance of bringing together companies, civil society and everyone with an interest in promoting tech education and improving the technology curriculum. We now have coding classes for children as young as five, with the support of wider society.

Accelerating the growth of the digital tech sector across the country is important. We are supporting 40,000 entrepreneurs and up to 4,000 start-ups as they

scale up their businesses. As Tech City UK becomes Tech Nation, we will deliver support in 11 cities across the UK, including Belfast, Cardiff and Newcastle. Our digital skills partnership is central to the skills provision across the whole of the UK.

Several hon. Members were kind enough to invite me to their constituencies. I do not know whether it is rude to say that I am going where I have not been invited, but I am actually going to York. As the hon. Member for York Central said, it is also known for fibre. TalkTalk is investing hugely in connecting fibre to premises in the whole of the city of York. A very interesting piece in the *Financial Times* just this morning said that York is taking the lead in piloting the use of digital technology to map traffic congestion in realtime, so that traffic signals can be adjusted to improve the flow of traffic, with all the additional benefits that that brings. I was interested to hear about the digital creative labs there and about the importance of the gaming industry, which is absolutely crucial. That industry engages young people, so it has a double advantage. I shall endeavour to visit it while I am there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) talked about procurement opportunities for UK SMEs, which are very important. In some respects, it will be difficult to secure a preference for UK SMEs in contracting. It will depend on the final terms of our relationship with the EU when we leave, and on any new trade deals that we are successful in negotiating. With that proviso, I certainly share his desire to see better opportunities for SMEs in procurement.

The constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans is at the centre of a great number of exciting developments in technology, and it is terrific that she is taking the lead in her constituency and making her contribution to the rest of the UK's development. The Government are committed to making Britain a world leader in the digital and technology sector.

It is fantastic that so many colleagues made excellent contributions this afternoon. I apologise for running over slightly.

3.59 pm

Mrs Main: I am delighted that the Minister is coming to St Albans. I shall be ruffling through the diary with Imagination Technologies. This debate was so valuable because, apart from the odd barb here and there, everybody was in agreement. I completely agree with the shadow Minister—I do not usually say such things—that broadband access is vital; it absolutely needs to be rolled out. We have to lose the concept that everything is London-centric. I am delighted that this is the way forward. This is the world of the future. I am pleased that so many colleagues took part in the debate. I thought their speeches were excellent. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about learning online. We will have to have some new excuses to replace "The dog ate my homework" in a digital world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the UK digital and tech industries.

Fishing: East Anglia

[MR IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Renaissance of East Anglian Fishing campaign.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I am very pleased to have secured this debate, as it provides an ideal opportunity to highlight the work getting underway in Lowestoft, in my constituency, and along the East Anglian coast to launch the campaign to deliver the renaissance of East Anglian fisheries. I am delighted that my neighbour, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), is responding for the Government.

REAF was launched last month, on 15 March, at the East Anglian fishing conference at the Hotel Victoria in Lowestoft. Up to 150 people attended, predominantly local and many from the local fishing industry. Many of the speakers were local, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), gave a keynote speech and we had a productive workshop in which some very good ideas were put forward for how best to revitalise the industry. Brexit provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do that—to start again with a clean sheet of paper and to have a complete rethink of how we manage these fisheries.

Fishing has taken place along the East Anglian coast for more than a thousand years. Lowestoft was previously the fishing capital of the southern North sea and was the hub of an industry that included many other ports, such as Kings Lynn, Cromer, Sheringham, Yarmouth, Kessingland, Southwold, Aldeburgh, Orford, Felixstowe Ferry, Maldon, Colchester and Southend. East Anglia sits next to one of the richest fishing grounds in Europe, but today little local benefit is derived from that. Most of the UK vessels registered in East Anglia and fishing off our coast are smaller than 10 metres and many of them target shellfish or fin fish in the inshore areas.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me permission to intervene beforehand. The bottom line is that, while UK vessels land 40% of their catch from UK waters, Norway and Iceland land 83% and 90% respectively in theirs. That shows the indisputable fact that the European Union has never given us our fair share and never will. As such, does he agree that it is imperative that we regain full control of our waters and do not accept anything that does not bring the control of fishing in British waters back into the hands of the MPs here and the people who we represent?

Peter Aldous: The hon. Gentleman's point is well made.

It is important that our region derives the maximum possible economic benefit from Brexit. REAF is seeking to achieve that goal, with the local industry taking the lead in planning the future of East Anglian fishing. The intention is to set out our stall, and to work with Government, to make the most of this once-in-a-lifetime

opportunity. That approach is consistent with the Prime Minister's desire for the Government to work with the fishing industry to secure a better deal for coastal communities.

I shall briefly outline what I believe are the three ingredients to deliver REAF. First, East Anglian fishermen must be given the opportunity to catch more fish. The region's catch sector predominantly comprises the inshore fleet, which, as has been well documented, does not get a fair slice of the cake. The six vessels in the Lowestoft Fish Producers Organisation land their catches in the Netherlands and Peterhead. We need to be in a position whereby fish caught in the exclusive economic zone off the East Anglian coast are landed in local ports, thereby benefiting local people, local businesses and local communities.

If the quota system is to continue, there needs to be a radical reallocation in favour of locally based fishermen, so that they can earn a fair living and the full benefit of their hard work, which often takes place in extremely harsh conditions, can be secured for the ports and communities in which they live and work and for allied industries, such as local processors, merchants, ship repairers and maintenance services.

Secondly—this goes hand in hand with landing more fish in East Anglian ports—there is a need to invest in infrastructure, skills and supply chain businesses in those ports and their surrounding areas. Although in many respects it is surprising how much of the supporting sector remains in Lowestoft and other East Anglian ports, there is concern that it does not have the capacity to cope with a significant increase in landings. There must be a whole-industry approach from the net to the plate.

Thirdly, a new management system must be put in place that has the full confidence and respect of all those working in the industry. The system must be based on science and be local, sustainable and collaborative. Being based on science means making decisions that are established on scientific evidence, not political expediency. The Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, which has its headquarters in Lowestoft, should be at the heart of that locally, nationally and internationally. The Government are to be commended for their foresight in investing in the redevelopment of CEFAS's Lowestoft headquarters, which is now getting under way.

The system must be truly local and tailored to ensure the bespoke management of individual fisheries—a bottom-up approach to replace the top-down strategy. The new system must have sustainability ingrained in its DNA, it should guard against unsustainable practices such as electric pulse fishing, which is having a particularly devastating impact on local fisheries in the southern North sea, and it should ensure that those working in the industry can plan and invest for the future. Fisheries management must be a tripartite partnership of fishermen, scientists and regulators, collaborating and working together. We must do away with the current “them and us” approach that pervades much of the current regulatory system. That will mean fishermen taking on new responsibilities and regulators working with them.

People left the conference of 15 March in an upbeat mood. The following week, the Government published the implementation agreement for leaving the EU, which provides for the UK to leave the common fisheries policy on 31 December 2020, rather than at an earlier

date, as so many had hoped. As a result, that positive outlook was replaced by anger and despair. Helpfully, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State subsequently have made assurances that on 31 December 2020 the UK will resume full control of the seas in our exclusive economic zone, that we will decide who can access those waters and on what terms, and that no deals will be done beforehand that use fishing as bargaining chip as part of the wider Brexit negotiations.

That said, there are issues arising from the implementation agreement that need clarifying. Notwithstanding the wording of article 125 of the implementation agreement, which sets out the specific arrangements on fishing opportunities during the implementation period, there is a real worry that the best interests of the fishing industry will be irretrievably compromised during this period. We will be subject to the common fisheries policy and the landing obligations with the maximum sustainable yield target, but we will have a significantly reduced influence on the annual negotiations. The discards ban will be implemented during this period and its negative impact on the inshore fleet will be significant, yet we will have a very much diminished opportunity to promote measures to alleviate its impact. In effect, we will be bound by the CFP during this period, but only consulted on fishing opportunities in UK waters.

There is also a concern that the provisions of article 125 may set a precedent for future policy and negotiations with the EU. There is a worry about paragraph 4 of that article, which refers to maintaining

“the relative stability keys for the allocation of fishing opportunities”

during the implementation period. The main challenge for East Anglian fishermen is that they are unable to land enough fish to earn a fair living or supply the local processing industry. “Relative stability” in many respects underpins the status quo, and it is important that, after we leave the CFP, we start again with a clean sheet of paper for allocating fishing opportunities. If we do not, any gains will be enjoyed by the few, not the many.

As I mentioned, the East Anglian fishing fleet is predominantly inshore, comprising what have become known as the under-10s. That part of the industry is hanging on by its fingertips, and there is a worry that it will struggle to survive to the end of the implementation period. Action is needed to address the situation. It is important that we use the additional preparatory time wisely, and I make the following suggestions for how we might do so.

First, on 29 March 2019, the UK will become an independent coastal state with duties and obligations under the United Nations convention on the law of the sea. We must be fully prepared to discharge those rights and responsibilities. Secondly, the fisheries White Paper and fisheries Bill should be published as soon as practically possible so that the industry and parliamentarians can help shape a future policy framework, which should have the flexibility to respond to local needs and demands.

Thirdly, East Anglian fishermen need to be able to land more fish so they can earn a fair living. In the short term, that can be achieved by reallocating a share of existing quota to the inshore fleet. In the longer term, we need to tackle the situation that fish caught in UK waters are not landed in UK ports. Much of Britain's quota is currently held by overseas businesses. The economic link requirements of vessel licences must be

reformed and then enforced. Fourthly, the UK will withdraw from the London fisheries convention on 3 July 2019, providing us full access rights to our fishing grounds in the zone between 6 nautical miles and 12 nautical miles from our coast. Consideration should be given to how best to take advantage of that opportunity.

Last Friday, Waveney District Council submitted REAF's application for a European maritime and fisheries fund grant to the Marine Management Organisation. The proposed project will enable us to develop a long-term strategy for the future of the East Anglian fishing industry. It is a bottom-up initiative with widespread local and industry support. It is an exciting, innovative and compelling proposal that is a beacon of positivity at a time when the fishing industry is under intense pressure and there is anger and disappointment about the Brexit transitional arrangements. The project is designed to help shape a positive and profitable future for the industry as a whole, from the net to the plate. Its objective is to establish how the economic and social benefits of the fishing industry in East Anglia can best be captured and optimised locally and regionally.

There are three elements to the project: data and information gathering and analysis; a forward look at the prospective changes and the development of possible options for bringing benefits to the region's fishing industry and coastal communities; and the preparation of a regional fisheries strategy. The project will examine why, despite the profitability of the UK fleet overall having increased year on year for the past 10 years, that improvement has bypassed Lowestoft and East Anglia. It will analyse the fishing fleets across the region to provide a starting point for developing a regional strategy. At local level, it will look at how a new management system can be put in place that takes into account the different sections of the fleet and ensures that they are managed in the most efficient and effective way. The project will assess the catch potential for East Anglian vessels and what changes should be made to the economic link requirements, and analyse the whole supply chain to establish how best to maximise the opportunity presented by Brexit.

In short, this is prudent and long-term strategic planning at its best. It is estimated that the project will cost approximately £160,000 and take nine months to complete. The application is for 75% of the cost of the project to come from the EMFF, and we are looking to the Government to contribute the remaining 25%. There is sound justification for them to do so, as the proposal has collective interests and beneficiaries and is highly innovative. We have looked at other sources of funding, such as councils, the coastal communities fund and the New Anglia local enterprise partnership, but those options cannot be pursued, either because the money is not there or because a bid would not satisfy the various eligibility criteria.

The bid is compelling. It is exactly the sort of sensible long-term planning that should be done as we leave the EU to open up new and exciting business opportunities. It would be unfortunate if this highly innovative project stalled at a time when the industry is badly bruised.

Special thanks are due to the local community champions who came together to form REAF, some of whom are here today. There are many of them, but I pay special tribute to June Mummary and Paul Lines, whose passion and determination have been so important. REAF provides

[Peter Aldous]

a great opportunity to revitalise a uniquely East Anglian industry for the benefit of local communities that feel they have been dispossessed and ignored for too long. In policy terms, the Government need to provide a national framework for fishing that has the flexibility to respond to different local demands and allows the industry to flourish all around the coast. REAF is looking to provide the cornerstone for that in East Anglia, and I hope that the Government can work with and endorse its locally derived, innovative and well thought-through initiative, which has strong local backing.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), on securing this debate. I know that our fishing industry is of huge importance to him, his constituents and the many other coastal communities around the UK. His has been an important voice in the wider fisheries debate, particularly at the recent REAF conference in Lowestoft.

Unfortunately, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), cannot be here because he is in the Faroe Islands discussing potential future fisheries arrangements. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney pointed out, the Fisheries Minister spoke at the recent REAF conference. As the MP for an East Anglian coastal community—there are fishermen along the Suffolk coast—I am delighted to be able to reply to this debate about the REAF campaign. As my hon. Friend knows, this issue is not only of great importance to my constituents, but arguably one of the most totemic issues following the decision to leave the European Union.

The Government absolutely recognise that leaving the EU presents us with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape the future of fisheries in the United Kingdom. I am encouraged by the passion and enthusiasm of people throughout East Anglia to build up the industry for the benefit of their communities. The REAF campaign is strong and inspiring evidence of that passion.

I congratulate the applicants on submitting their initial bid for EMFF funding to support the REAF campaign, and I understand that it will be considered through the normal processes. I hope my hon. Friend understands that I cannot make any commitments to funding in this debate—most of all because I would probably have to declare some kind of constituency interest. However, I am sure he will be aware that the bid will be considered carefully. I understand the apprehension of some hon. Members during this period of uncertainty, but we recognise that the drive of the people in Waveney and other fishing communities around the country will be one of the main determining factors that will result in a thriving and prosperous local industry.

I know the outcome of the implementation period negotiations was not the one that many hon. Members of this House wanted; it was certainly not the one the Government sought, either. We were clear at the outset of negotiations that specific arrangements should be

agreed for fisheries during the implementation period. We pressed hard during negotiations to secure the outcome, and we were disappointed that the EU was not willing to move on that point. When the UK leaves the EU on 29 March 2019, we will no longer be a member state, and we will formally leave the common fisheries policy. However, as my hon. Friend pointed out, under the agreement current fisheries rules will continue to apply during the implementation period.

In regard to the annual negotiations of fishing opportunities, the agreement clarifies that the UK's share of quotas will not change during the implementation period and that the UK will be able to attend international negotiations. That means we will continue to follow existing CFP rules for technical conservation as well as total annual catch and quota. Furthermore, the agreement includes an obligation on both sides to act in good faith during the implementation period. It is really important to recognise that while there may be a perception that all of a sudden UK fishing will be done down, we should not accept that assertion—not least because there is a dispute resolution mechanism where we can make a challenge if we feel the EU is not acting in good faith. However, I stress again that such arrangements will apply only to negotiations in 2019.

By December 2020, we will be negotiating fishing opportunities for 2021 as a third country and an independent coastal state, and at that point we will be completely outside the common fisheries policy. Any decisions about giving access to our waters to vessels from the EU and any other coastal states will then be a matter for negotiation.

The Government's future vision for fisheries will be laid out in a White Paper, to be published in due course, which will be followed by a fisheries Bill that will give us the legal powers necessary to manage our fisheries in the future and enable us to develop a truly UK fisheries policy, in particular by controlling access to our own waters and setting fishing opportunities. Arrangements are well under way to put in place domestic preparations to ensure that we are ready to take advantage of the opportunities from leaving not only the EU but the London fisheries convention.

In general, the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will ensure that that we will have the necessary rules in place on the day after exit. That provides the maximum possible certainty and continuity to businesses, workers and consumers across the UK. The fisheries Bill will then enable us to develop a truly United Kingdom fisheries policy—in particular, as I said, by controlling access to our own waters and setting fishing opportunities.

When we think about the future, it is important to ensure that we have a sustainable fishing industry. It is helpful to reflect that overall many aspects of the UK marine environment are improving. About 30% of fish stocks are now at sustainable levels, and the proportion of large fish in the North sea has climbed steadily since 2010 to levels not seen since the 1980s. That is a valuable reminder of what we can achieve to help build a sustainable resource for future generations.

While our role in fisheries management will change, we remain committed to working with the EU and other coastal states to manage those shared fish stocks sustainably, in line with our international commitments. We want to be a responsible coastal state and to develop a collaborative working relationship with our international

partners. We are proud of our record of championing sustainable fisheries and the end of wasteful discarding. However, we fully recognise the need to ensure that the future UK discard policy has the necessary flexibilities to avoid the problem of choke with species such as cod and saithe.

As I pointed out, we will shortly set out our vision for sustainable fisheries management in our White Paper. During that time, the Government and the Marine Management Organisation will work together in closer partnership with industry, scientific organisations and other stakeholders as well as our colleagues in the devolved Administrations to help shape our future management strategy and ensure it is evidence based. That is a strong point that my hon. Friend affirmed is necessary.

My hon. Friend pointed out concern about the article 152 precedent and relative stability. Our advice is that the implementation period and what is agreed then will not set a precedent for the future. I assure him that we are committed to ensuring that, as I have set out, we will be able to shape our future management strategy and negotiate on who is in our coastal waters and the fishing opportunities there.

We absolutely want to safeguard the long-term profitability of the industry. Through the ongoing negotiations, we will work hard to ensure the best deal for the whole of the UK fishing industry and support the needs of inshore fleets and coastal communities such as those in East Anglia. Since 2012, to help support the under-10-metre fleet, the Government have realigned quota that had not been fished, leased, gifted or swapped by processor organisations and was considered unused. My hon. Friend will be aware of the huge court battle that ensued, but the Government won, and that has delivered a 13% increase in quota for the under-10-metre fleet. In 2016, that equated to almost 700 tonnes of additional quota.

Our new fisheries policy must be forward looking, responsive, sustainable, resilient and competitive. We should all look towards the innovation and diversification taking place in other coastal communities in order to help build a profitable and stable career choice for a new generation of fishing businesses in East Anglia. As well

as changes in quota, I agree that investment in vessels, infrastructure, skills and the wider supply chain will be needed to improve fisheries management and the sector's profitability.

In October 2016, the Chancellor announced that all projects funded from the EMFF approved before March 2019 will be fully funded, even after the UK has left the EU. It is expected that the EMFF will continue to be open for new projects until 2020. I am aware from my hon. Friend that the valuable information he gathered at the conference in his constituency will be used to shape the design of any possible future funding schemes.

I am conscious of the local community where fishing is totemic. It is more than that; it is the livelihoods of many people there. It is about people who fish, people who process and the ongoing economic security that brings to their families. I am aware that alternative careers have been developing at Lowestoft and surrounding ports to support the offshore wind farm, but my hon. Friend and I agree that that should not be at the expense of a secure future for fishing in East Anglia. We want to ensure that.

With more than 10,000 miles of mainland coastline—quite a lot of it is in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend—the UK has some of the most varied marine habitats of any coastal waters. He is right to pay tribute to CEFAS, which undertakes a strong role, and I am pleased that investment is under way.

Our habitats in coastal waters make a critical contribution to biodiversity. Our seas support the national economy and our local economy with jobs, providing us with food, raw materials and beautiful, irreplaceable recreational destinations. I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that in leaving the European Union we must take the opportunity to create a world-class fisheries management system based on the principle of maximum sustainable yield and help to restore and protect the marine ecosystem. Both ends are compatible. It is our ambition to take the opportunity presented also to reflect our proud maritime heritage in policies that create a stronger, resilient, more productive fishing industry—for the next generation in East Anglia, and for generations to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Austerity: Life Expectancy

4.30 pm

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

That this House has considered austerity and changes in life expectancy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. Life expectancy is the statistical analysis of that most basic feature of health, life itself. Through these linear annals, since the early years of Queen Victoria's reign, the health and wellbeing of this nation have been catalogued. Life expectancy serves as the statistical testimony of the social history of our country. Through it are revealed the national crises and epidemics, the giant leaps forward in public health and the great workplace, environmental and social reforms that have marked the last two centuries of change.

In the first collection, published in 1841, the English life table gave female life expectancy as 41 years and male as 40. The changes that followed in the subsequent 180 years have seen those doubled. The turn of the 20th century saw a dramatic drop in infant and childhood mortality as sanitation and living standards improved. Improvements in the treatment of infectious disease, the creation of the NHS, the Clean Air Act 1956 and improvements in maternity care, living standards and incomes followed, and with them rises in life expectancy that were sustained for almost a century. Neither wars nor global convulsions could stem the inexorable upward rise.

That was the great era of a remarkable revolution in public health. By 2011, women's life expectancy had reached 83 and men's 79. With three months added with each passing year, a little girl born in Sheffield in 2011 had every right to expect to live to be 100 years old. Those assumptions were not based on any great improvements or medical discoveries, but simply on the fact that our health was improving and would continue to do so.

However, since 2011, something unusual and, in modern British history, unprecedented has happened to life expectancy: it has flatlined. For the first time in well over a century, the health of the people of this nation has stopped improving. It is of course axiomatic that life expectancy cannot increase forever, and that a slowdown in growth would eventually occur, but it is the sudden and sustained rise in mortality rates that has so concerned public health professionals and should concern us as parliamentarians.

The period from July 2014 to June 2015 saw an additional 39,074 deaths in England and Wales, compared with the same period the previous year. While mortality rates fluctuate year on year, that was the largest rise for nearly 50 years, and the higher rate of mortality was maintained throughout 2016 and into 2017. Provisional figures on the number of weekly deaths indicate that winter mortality was higher than usual in early 2015, 2017 and 2018.

Those recent trends contrast starkly with the long-term decline in age-specific mortality rates throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Now, research published in *The BMJ* has revealed the shocking fact that 10,000 more people died in the first seven weeks of 2018 than in the same period in 2017. The study finds no external factor that might have caused the 11% rise: no unusual

cold snap, natural disaster or flu outbreak outside normal expectations. The Office for National Statistics has gone so far as to revise down its official life expectancy projections by almost a whole year, compared with the projections of just two years ago. That means 1 million further earlier deaths are now projected over the next 40 years.

The *Financial Times* has reported that the deceleration of previous rises in life expectancy has cut £310 billion from future British pension fund liabilities. As Professor Danny Dorling of the University of Oxford has noted, what is happening with life expectancy,

"is no longer being treated as a temporary decline; it is the new norm."

Dorling and Dr Hiam have looked at other extraneous factors to explain those projections. A rise in birth rates? No—birth rates are falling. More migration? The ONS now projects less inward migration over the next 40 years.

How then to explain an increase of 40,000 deaths on what was projected for this year, and an extra 25,000 deaths for next year? We can only conclude that there has been a sharp deterioration in the collective health of this country. Dominic Harrison, Director of Public Health for Blackburn and Darwen, and an adviser to Public Health England, has said that the figures are a "strong and flashing" amber light that,

"something is making the population more vulnerable to avoidable death.

We know that in some areas the picture is even more concerning, with higher death rates and life expectancy falling. Research has pinpointed 29 areas where we see falling life expectancy for women; chief among them are seaside towns and post-industrial areas.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Barnsley, the area I represent, has one of the lowest life expectancies in the country. Does she agree that post-industrial towns such as Barnsley need more funding and resources to tackle the inequality between north and south?

Louise Haigh: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. She makes an important point, because it is exactly those post-industrial towns and regions that were invested in so heavily under the last Labour Government and have seen a fall in life expectancy over the last seven years.

Regional and class inequalities in health, as we know, are nothing new, but there is a more distinct change now taking place. In my city of Sheffield, the healthy life expectancy for women of 57.5 years has dropped by four years since 2009, while healthy life expectancy across the country has basically held steady. There are already too many areas in our country where healthy life expectancy is unacceptably low. The average baby girl born in Manchester between 2014 and 2016 will live to be 79, but only until age 54 will she be healthy. That is almost one third of her life spent grappling with health issues that will not affect the average woman born on Orkney until she is 71 years old.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): One of the factors, if not the sole factor, is that when we look at the past recession, most of the burden has been inflicted

on women generally. We all know that. That is an anxiety factor, and there are good examples of it. One good example is the women of the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. A lot of them were due to retire and had plans; those plans have gone now, because they will not get their entitlement. There are a number of factors that affect women more than men, particularly during a recession.

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It has particularly hit older women, and I will come on to that disproportionate impact shortly.

Something is adversely affecting the health of our population, and as my hon. Friend has just said, none of it is happening in a vacuum. The observation is unavoidable that these patterns coincide with the era of austerity. It is simply inconceivable that the state of our public realm, welfare system, housing, fuel poverty, child poverty and our NHS have nothing at all to do with it. The number of NHS trusts with budget deficits has increased sharply since 2015, as have waiting periods for elective surgery and waits for urgent care. Hospitals are now warning of an “eternal winter”, as records show the number of patients receiving urgent care within four hours fell to a record low in March 2018. Almost half a million patients waited longer than 18 weeks for planned care.

This week, the Royal College of Physicians raised the alarm, writing to hon. Members to tell us that hospitals are “underfunded, underdoctored, overstretched”. That will not be news to anybody who has been anywhere close to the NHS in recent years. However, the shortage of doctors and consultants revealed by the RCP is systematic and shocking; 43% of advertised consultant posts last year in Yorkshire and the Humber were not appointed to. In acute medicine, only five out of 26 posts were successfully appointed to. The RCP concludes that these workforce shortages have direct implications for patient safety. Although our hospitals still provide expert care, relentlessly drawing on the good will of staff—who cannot possibly provide the best possible care when under such pressure—is unsustainable.

Issues within the NHS are being compounded by problems with the provision of adult social care. According to the King's Fund, in 2016-17 there were 380,000 cases of a delayed transfer of care due to patients' awaiting a hospital assessment. A similar number were waiting for a place in a nursing home. It is little surprise that the sorry state of our social care system should be linked to a fall in the life expectancy of older women living in the poorest parts of the UK, because that cohort has seen a disproportionate fall in their life expectancy. For the first time, health inequality is rising because the most deprived are suffering with poorer health.

I have often heard it said that the elderly have been protected from the worst ravages of austerity, but the elderly who live in deprived communities have been hit many times over. Relevant to this debate, they have been hit first by the cut in pension credit for lower-income groups and then through the funding pressures on adult social care. Of course, it is in the local authorities serving the most deprived areas that these effects have been felt the most.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, especially on the impact on the elderly. However, does she agree that

more and more children are now being impacted by austerity? Slough Foodbank has noticed an increase in the number of families attending its food bank, saying:

“When we checked the vouchers, we discovered that there had been an increase of 16% in the number of children we helped in 2017 compared to 2016.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that child poverty is addressed now? There are lifelong implications for those who grow up in poverty, such as poorer academic results, employment prospects and life expectancy.

Louise Haigh: I am glad that my hon. Friend raises that important point, because I am not able to address all the factors behind declining life expectancy. The British Medical Association raised that point this week, saying it is very concerned about the 5 million children growing up in poverty and the implications that that will have in the future on life expectancy.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I do not want to divert my hon. Friend from the main course of her speech, but she knows that, over the past 30 years, infant mortality has fallen by 60%, yet from 2015 onwards it has risen in England and Wales each year. Holywell Central and Flint Castle wards in my constituency have child poverty rates of 43% and 42%. We have seen an increase of 100 children in poverty in my constituency in the last year. This is a long-term issue, which we need to address.

Louise Haigh: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: these are long-term issues, which need addressing. They are all the more heartbreaking because we have seen decades of progress, and we all assumed that that would only go in one direction; little did any of us imagine that we would see a rise in infant mortality in the sixth-richest country in the world. These figures are, quite frankly, inexcusable.

On social care, care homes in deprived communities often no longer receive enough to cover the costs of care, which inevitably compromises the quality that they are able to provide. For those in such communities who cannot afford private care homes, that reduction of quality, and in some cases the lack of any available residential care at all, has had a punishing effect.

All Members present will have received casework regarding those still in their homes in the community who rely on care packages. Their care is simply unacceptable, relying on care workers who are paid far too little and who often do upward of 25 care visits every single day. There is not a chance, even by unsustainably drawing on the boundless good will of those care workers, that visits could last for 30 minutes, as defined by official guidance. It is beyond the realms of possibility. Those millions of hours of lost contact time for the 470,000 vulnerable—predominantly elderly—people who use home care will have undoubtedly compromised their long-term care and support needs and the management of multiple conditions.

It perhaps should not be a surprise that the rise in mortality and the fall in life expectancy came from precisely that cohort—older women living alone in poorer areas. In many senses, they were the early-warning sign of the deeply troubling trend in increasing mortality. This cohort, more reliant than any other on a functioning, effective, compassionate state providing quality support,

[*Louise Haigh*]

have been badly let down in recent years. It should be a source of national shame that elderly women in some of the most deprived areas of our country are living in isolation, not properly cared for, and are losing their lives because the state has not supported them. However, it is not just that cohort of women. Some 7% of the extra deaths in 2016-17 were of people aged between 20 and 60. Almost 2,000 more younger men and 1,000 more younger women have died than would have if progress had not stalled.

I am sure that the Minister cannot look at the evidence presented here today, or at the research undertaken over the past two years, and not want to take steps to tackle those shocking statistics and to prevent those lives from being cut short. It is therefore critical that Ministers and the Government take seriously the fall in life expectancy and the evidence behind the growth in mortality. Up to now, Public Health England has regrettably tried to attribute it to the greater prevalence of flu. However, as Loopstra noted in her report:

“If Public Health England’s attribution of rising mortality to cold weather and flu is correct, then it should lead to an elevation of mortality in regional swathes across the nation. However...trends have varied considerably across local authorities, with no apparent geographic patterning consistent with regional outbreaks.”

The rise in unexpected mortality and the concurrent fall in life expectancy represents a significant moment in the history of public health in this country, yet the Department of Health has so far rejected the call from public health professionals for an inquiry into the sharp rise in deaths. I repeat that call today, and ask the Minister to look very seriously at the evidence presented on the link between life expectancy and austerity.

I will end on the words of Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basten, who have undertaken so much of the research in this area:

“demography is not destiny. Projections are not predictions. There is no preordained inevitability that a million years of life need be lost...but only through politics comes the power to make the changes that are now so urgently needed.”

The Minister has that power in her hands, and there can be no more pressing question for her than to ask why the citizens of our country are dying sooner than they should. I hope she leaves no stone unturned in pursuit of that answer.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I do not intend to put a formal time limit on speeches. However, there are two Opposition spokespersons as well as the Minister, and I would like to start calling the Opposition spokespersons just after the hour, so if Members could speak for about five minutes each, that would be helpful.

4.47 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (*Louise Haigh*) for bringing this important matter before the House.

I will start with the economics, because the debate relates to austerity and life expectancy. Government Members would probably talk about living within our means and would put to the hon. Lady the argument that the consequences for the poor and the vulnerable of a country continuing to live beyond its means are

very grave. Economic history tells us that when countries lose control of their finances, it is not the well-to-do or the comfortable who suffer, but the poor and the vulnerable. That needs to be put very firmly on the record.

It is also worth noting that the Commonwealth Fund, which is an independent body, last year pointed out that our NHS was the best health system of the 11 different health systems it looked at. If we look at our outcomes on strokes, heart attacks and cancer, we see that they are getting better—there are 7,000 people alive today who would not be alive had we not seen that improvement in cancer outcomes.

Looking at the data across Europe, we see that what is happening in the UK is part of a trend, because life expectancy is also falling in Italy, Spain, France and Germany. Some of those countries spend quite a lot more on health than we do. France and Germany spend one percentage point of GDP more on health than we do, yet they have also seen that downward trend.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Selous: I will in a moment. There has been no austerity in Germany, because the Germans live within their means and run a big budget surplus. They have a trade surplus with China. However, life expectancy is falling in Germany as well. We need to look at these wider factors and at the European context. I will now of course give way, with great pleasure, to my former colleague on the Health Committee.

Dr Whitford: Does the hon. Gentleman also recognise from the data that there is not a similar fall in life expectancy in the Scandinavian countries and that it is wrong to look narrowly at health services, because the biggest driver in relation to life expectancy is poverty?

Andrew Selous: I will come on to those very important public health issues and what we need to do about them, because I care passionately about them, as probably everyone in the Chamber does. As the hon. Lady is from Scotland, it is also worth looking at what is happening there, because Scotland offers free adult social care and spends a higher amount on healthcare per head than England, yet still has a lower life expectancy than England. We need to get those issues firmly—

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Selous: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I am going to make a bit of progress, because I am mindful of your admonition, Mr Paisley, not to take too long and I want all the Opposition Members to have their say as well.

What do we need to do about this situation? We have 25% more nurses coming into the system—that training has started—and 25% more doctors coming into the system. We will get the social care Green Paper in July; we cannot get it a second too soon. I for one, as a Conservative Member on the Government side of the House, put up my hand: I want to see increased spending on health and social care, probably through a hypothecated tax. I think that is necessary. If we want quality, we have to pay for it.

We also need to consider issues such as obesity, exercise, air quality and housing quality. If we look at the obesity epidemic in our country, we see that it is now the poor who are much more obese than other social groups, and we know what a massive impact obesity has on health through diabetes and so on. We have to do better there. Why are only 2% of journeys in London made by bicycle? In Amsterdam, it is 30%. The children there cycle, there is much less childhood obesity, and that feeds into better health outcomes and better life expectancy. I chaired the Health Committee's Sub-Committee that looked into air quality. We need to do a lot better on air quality, and we need there to be good-quality housing.

I salute the intentions of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley. She is right to bring this issue before the House. But I would tell her to think of the broader economics and to look at the European comparisons and those important drivers of public health as well.

4.52 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing the debate. The issue of stalling life expectancy, and indeed of falling life expectancy in some areas, is very serious. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) talked about living within our means, but people in my constituency are dying early without their means.

We must reach out across the party political divide on this issue, because the constituencies affected are in poorer areas of the country, as has been mentioned, but they are not anomalies; many different parts of the country are affected. I will give an example. Life expectancy for females at age 65-plus has fallen over the past five years by 0.8 years in Stevenage and by 0.6 years in Cheltenham. Life expectancy for males at birth has fallen in my county of Denbighshire by 0.6 years and by 0.9 years in Bromsgrove. This issue affects a great many of our constituents, across the political divide and across the country. There must be the political will for us to understand the root causes of what has resulted in this debate.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that what is responsible for this situation is not just the restraint in spending, but the way in which spending restraint and austerity have played out on the frontline? The issue is the withdrawal of mental health services for people living at home. It is the teaching assistants who have all but been removed. In particular, it is the impact on services that help people to stay at home and manage conditions and the cuts to frontline policing that have led to the evisceration of not just life chances, but life expectancy itself.

Chris Ruane: I agree. All those issues are part of the mix as to why we are seeing a decrease in life expectancy. It is a complex issue that needs further inquiry.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Ruane: I am afraid that I must move on, because I have been getting eyes from the Chair and I do not want to upset Mr Paisley.

The Government have said that the situation is a blip because of flu or the cold weather. The Department of Health has seemed to downplay fears about life expectancy, pointing out that smoking rates have gone down and cancer rates have gone down, but that is all the more reason to be worried. If those indicators are going down and life expectancy is going down, what is causing that? Those are good indicators, but there are some bad outcomes for certain people in certain areas.

A report by Professor Martin McKee, whom I had the pleasure of meeting yesterday, notes that the most recent period

“has seen one of the greatest slowdowns in the rate of improvement” in life expectancy

“for both sexes since the 1890s”.

The relative data on life expectancy today is comparable to a time before workers' rights, advancements in medicine and technology, and the welfare state. That slowdown, as reported by the Office for National Statistics last July, shows that the increases in the previous period, before 2010, meant that for every five years that a woman was living, she could expect to live one year extra. Now it is the case that for every 10 years that a woman is living, she can expect to live one year extra. The rate has been halved.

Let me add to those figures some of my own, which I received through parliamentary questions that I tabled in January. Between 2009-11 and 2014-16, 19.8% and 20.3% of local authorities reported a decline for females at birth and at 65-plus respectively. There are certain areas of the country, certain demographics and certain genders—women—who are feeling this the most. That is no surprise, because 80% of the austerity cuts made since 2010 have fallen on the shoulders of women. The link between life expectancy and cuts to social care budgets has already been highlighted.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire mentioned Scotland. I do not want to stick up for the Scots: they can do a good job themselves, especially the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), with her medical background. However, there are national and regional variations within the United Kingdom. If we look at local authorities in England, we see that 22% of them have seen a decrease in life expectancy.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. Could the hon. Gentleman draw his remarks to a conclusion?

Chris Ruane: In Wales and Northern Ireland the figure is 18%. In Scotland it is only 6.2%. In the north-east of England, 27% of local authorities have seen a decrease in life expectancy. There are regional differences. What we can draw from that is that where there has been devolution and kinder, gentler Administrations, there has been a less sharp decline.

Hope is a powerful motivator in the way we make decisions. Messages of hope won historic victories for my party in 1945 and 1997 and denied the current Government their majority last year. What the Conservatives proposed at the last election, after seven years of austerity, was another 10 years of austerity. There is learned helplessness out there. People are sick and tired, and they are dying because there is no hope. They have lost income—£2,000 for most people and £5,000 for teachers. Austerity is biting, not just in

[Chris Ruane]

medicine but in social care, and affecting mental health and physical health. In the short time I have left, Mr Paisley, it is worth noting—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Very little time.

Chris Ruane: There is very little time, so I will draw my comments to a close by saying that Professor Martin McKee and other academics, from Oxford and other universities, want the Health Committee to have an inquiry on this issue. It is complex. I have mentioned some of the causes, and other MPs, from both sides of the Chamber, have mentioned some of the other causes of the decline in life expectancy. It is a complex mix of issues and deserves an inquiry by the Health Committee.

4.59 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Paisley. I shall keep my comments brief because many other Members wish to speak. I also take the opportunity to congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing a debate on this important matter.

When people think of the rolling hills of west Oxfordshire, I appreciate that poverty is not one of the things that immediately springs to mind, but that is to ignore some of the very real issues present in my constituency. There are real factors and pockets of deprivation, and rural poverty in particular is a real concern, so the issue is very live for those of us in the green shires, as well as for those in urban environments. I would like the House to bear that in mind.

The hon. Lady made some important points today, but I suggest that it is simplistic to look at a straightforward line between necessary control of public spending and an impact on life expectancy. As we have heard, a whole range of factors affect life expectancy and mortality—quality of life, mental health, obesity, housing, air quality—and simply to draw that straightforward causation line is to make things far too simple, when in fact we are dealing with a complex issue.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talked about it being simplistic to talk about the cuts, austerity and so forth, but let us talk, for example, about the cost of a pupil going to a pupil referral unit being 10 times more expensive, or the cost of someone in prison being £35,000 per year. If we invested such money earlier in education, mental health support or support for our young people, we would save money. Indeed, he is the one coming out with the simplistic argument.

Robert Courts: The hon. Lady will not be surprised to hear that I do not agree with her. She made a number of points, but I am simply suggesting that the issue is complex. Saying simply that necessary control of public spending leads to an increase in mortality, as is being suggested, is too simplistic.

Let us look at the example of Scotland—this is a simple and important point—where free adult social care is offered and more is spent on healthcare per head than in England. However, life expectancy there is still

lower than in England. That simply underlines my point, which I make in response to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley, that it is too simplistic to say that that link between spending and outcomes is as straightforward as she would make out. That cannot be the case, or the situation in Scotland would not be as it is.

For that matter, let us look at the outcomes across Europe. The Public Health England figures are quite striking, particularly in graph form. They show that not only do we have a slight dip in life expectancy figures over the course of the past year or so, but so too do Italy, Spain and, strikingly, France—a dip almost identical to what we have seen in the UK, despite the fact that I understand the French spend the highest amount in Europe on healthcare. We are clearly dealing with a much more complicated situation, and lifestyle factors are crucial. Those are not restricted to the UK.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley has accepted that life expectancy cannot be expected to increase forever. That is of course common sense and a point that she readily accepts, but the point bears repeating and remembering. For a number of reasons we have had extraordinary success in increasing healthcare over the past few years, but we are now faced with the results of that—an ageing and increasing population, therefore with increased complexity of morbidity factors.

I therefore applaud the approach being taken by the Government. We are not only investing as much as possible within the constraints of sensible Government spending, but ensuring that we address the lifestyle factors that can affect life expectancy in the round. However, as I continue to speak, I can see you looking at me with concern, Mr Paisley, so I will confine myself to those remarks.

5.3 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), whom I commend for securing the debate, spoke a lot about the impact of austerity on health and social care. To pick up on that, I should say that austerity has a triple impact. Spending on health and social care ends up being strangled, as we have seen: the reduction of the annual climb in expenditure from 3.5% to approximately 1%.

Of the two other impacts, one is the economic impact that we have faced ever since the crash at the end of the 2000s and which has been felt throughout Europe—I have a German husband, and I can tell you that while Germany itself may have a surplus, there are people there who are struggling and have not seen the wage rises that they would have liked. Also, in this country especially, we have seen welfare cuts, which have removed social security from people, creating particular areas and populations of poverty. That has particularly hit the disabled, children and pensioners.

There has been a lot of talk about healthcare. After 33 years as a doctor, I have to say that we can have far too much faith in what medicine can do to change overall life expectancy. We have some impact, but the biggest driver of ill health and the biggest impact on life expectancy is poverty and deprivation. That is something we have seen increasing in this country.

For example, over the past 20 years the rate of pensioner poverty dropped 28% to 13% by 2011-12, but it has now come back up to 16%. Twenty years ago in England, child poverty started out at 33%, got down at best to

27% in 2011-12, and is now back up at 30%. In fact, Scotland has the lowest rate in the UK: we started at a similar level, got down to 21% in 2011-12, and are still the lowest, at 24%. However, we have seen the same uplift, and that is because of aspects of social security and the impact of things such as the removal of child tax credits or the cuts to all the various social security supports. Over the past few years, similarly, poverty in general has risen slightly in England, Wales and Scotland, although Scotland has the lowest poverty rate, at 19%.

Important impacts of poverty on health include housing and fuel. People in the lowest 20th will be spending a third of their income on housing and, in the north of Scotland, another third on fuel. People are literally being squeezed and are struggling to eat well, which of course impacts on their health. We can see big differences in wealth across the UK. There is approximately twice the wealth in Kensington and Chelsea as in Glasgow—as well as more than 10 years' difference in life expectancy.

As has been mentioned, the improvement in life expectancy has halved, from three months to approximately six weeks, although in Scandinavian countries the improvement continues, because social support and the social fabric is something they invest in. In Scotland the life expectancy deprivation gap has narrowed from 13.5 years to nine. That gap can, in the raw sense, be influenced by healthcare—we manage to keep people alive—but we are not keeping people healthy. They are surviving but accruing more and more diseases. In Scotland, therefore, the healthy life expectancy gap has increased from 22.5 years to 26 years. People are struggling with all of that, and it results in a much higher health spend and much more pressure on the NHS. That is exactly what Members have been saying: there is no sensible saving of money if it ends up being spent somewhere else.

Infant mortality is a measure of the impact of poverty on health that is used right across the world. For three decades, infant mortality had been dropping; it has now taken a small uptick. In Scotland, again, we have the lowest infant mortality rate—0.5 per 1,000 live births lower than in England—but it too has gone back up. Look at the contrast between the wealthiest and poorest areas: in the wealthiest areas, just over 2.5 babies per 1,000 live births will die within a year; and in the poorest areas the rate is more than double that, at 5.9 per 1,000 live births. Read Professor Marmot, and we cannot escape what we have known for 20 years: that the biggest impact on survival, quality of life and outcomes is poverty—and the biggest driver of poverty is austerity.

5.9 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) for securing this important debate and for her excellent and well-informed speech. It is of great interest—not only to me, but to the public, who I am sure will be listening closely to the Minister's response today. I also want to thank the hon. Members for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and for Witney (Robert Courts), my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) and the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), for their thoughtful and passionate speeches, even though I do not necessarily agree with all the things that were said.

As we heard, life expectancy has always gradually increased. Between 1920 and 2010, it increased from 55 to 78 years for men and from 59 to 82 years for women. However, the improvement began to stall in 2011 when the coalition Government came in. That cannot be just a coincidence. Since then, for the first time in over a century, the health of people in England and Wales has stopped improving, and has flat-lined ever since.

I must emphasise that researchers do not believe that we have reached peak life expectancy. The Nordic countries, Japan and Hong Kong all have life expectancies greater than ours and they continue to increase, so why is life expectancy flat-lining in the UK? Why is Britain being left behind and fast becoming the sick man of Europe? I know that the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire said that that was not the case, but academic research by Danny Dorling, published in November 2017, which I have here, said:

“Life expectancy for women in the UK is now lower than in Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. Often it is much lower. Men...do little better.”

I think the hon. Gentleman needs to check his facts.

The life expectancy gap between the richest and poorest in this country is nothing less than shameful. According to the Institute of Health Equity, the longest life expectancy in the country is, not surprisingly, in the richest borough: Kensington and Chelsea. Men in Kensington and Chelsea can expect to live to 83 and women to 86. Unsurprisingly, you will find the lowest life expectancy in my part of it: the north and Scotland. In Glasgow, life expectancy for men is 73 and in West Dunbartonshire it is 79 for women—10 years of difference for men and seven years for women. The difference within the richest borough, Kensington and Chelsea, is even more stark. Despite living in the richest borough in the country, the most disadvantaged within it can expect to live 14 years less than their most advantaged counterparts. Does the Minister agree that this is completely unacceptable?

The north-south divide remains as relevant as ever when we look at healthy life expectancy—the years that people can expect to live a healthy life. In the south-east, the healthy life expectancy is 65.9 years for men and 66.6 years for women. However, people can expect a shorter healthy life expectancy in the north-east, where men have a healthy life expectancy of 59.7 years and women 59.8 years. That is significantly lower than the England average. Looking after those people during that unhealthy part of life means a huge cost to the NHS. It also means that the inequality gap in healthy life expectancy at birth between the south-east and the north-east is 6.2 years for men and 6.8 years for women.

What will the Minister do to address the life expectancy and healthy life expectancy gap between the rich and poor, and the north and south? It is simply unacceptable that the least advantaged in our society bear the brunt of this Government's policies—wherever they live. Austerity is not a choice. It is a political ideology, which harms the poorest and the most vulnerable in our communities.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Rubbish!

Mrs Hodgson: It is not rubbish. Professor Sir Michael Marmot warned:

“If we don't spend appropriately on social care, if we don't spend appropriately on health care, the quality of life will get worse for older people and maybe the length of life, too”.

[Mrs Hodgson]

Sadly, we have seen this across the board. Despite the growing pressure on our health and social care service, the Government are responsible for spending cuts across our NHS, social care and public health services. While demand continues to increase, the Government have taken away vital funding, which could close the life expectancy gap.

Since local authorities became responsible for public health budgets in 2015, it is estimated by the King's Fund that, on a like-for-like basis, public health spending will have fallen by 5.2%. That follows a £200 million in-year cut to public health spending in 2015-16. Further real-term cuts are to come, averaging between 3.9% each year between 2016-17 and 2020-21. On the ground, that means cuts to spending on tackling drug misuse among adults of more than £22 million compared with last year and smoking cessation services cut by almost £16 million. Spending to tackle obesity, which the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire mentioned as a cause of shorter life expectancy, has also fallen by 18.5% between 2015-16 and 2016-17 and further cuts are in the pipeline. These are vital services for local communities and could benefit their health and lifestyle, but sadly they continue to be cut due to lack of funding.

How does the Minister expect to close the life expectancy gap without investing properly in vital public health services? An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure. The Government must invest in public health and prevention services, as that could play a significant role in closing the life expectancy gap that we are discussing.

When the Prime Minister made her first speech on the steps of Downing Street—the Minister is nodding, because she knows the quote—she said:

“if you are born poor, you will die on average nine years earlier than others.”

We were all pleased that the Prime Minister highlighted that issue, but I have been left disappointed with her Government's lack of response to tackle it. We on this side of the House are committed to ensuring that our health and care system is properly funded, so that all children are given the best possible start in life and older people are treated with the respect and dignity that they deserve. I hope that the Minister will clearly outline what the Government will do to close the life expectancy gap.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I thank all hon. Members for complying so obediently with the timing that I requested.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed. Clearly, we all want the best possible outcomes for all our constituents, and it is in that spirit that we approach this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing the debate. I know her constituency well. Actually, looking at hon. Members opposite, I know the constituency of the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) well, also. That really brings into stark relief some of the issues we are talking about, because at the heart of

the issue of life expectancy is the issue of inequality. I can speak from personal experience in my own constituency. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) talked about the differences between north and south, and rich and poor. Within my constituency there is a 10-year difference in life expectancy in the two-mile trip from the north of my constituency to the south, where it is poorest.

We are all acutely aware that inequalities lead to lower life expectancy. It would be a poor Minister for Health—indeed, a poor Member of Parliament or anyone involved in public life—who did not think that was important. It is important that we address it and we are determined to do so. I will run through some things, which tell a better story than the stark figures we have heard today. I will also address some of the points made about those figures, because I think it would be premature to draw too many conclusions at this stage about the causes of those and whether this is a long-term trend.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) also made some wise points. Ultimately, we can only spend what we collect from taxpayers. We are having an active debate on the extent of the funding we need to make available for health and social care. In this 70th anniversary year of the founding of the NHS, it is appropriate to focus on that. We will continue, notwithstanding the fiscal challenges that we face, to prioritise spending on health.

It is important to emphasise that this dip in life expectancy is not unique to the UK. We have seen it elsewhere in Europe. We need to be circumspect about drawing too much by way of conclusion.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West mentioned the Prime Minister's speech. I want to supply the context of the Government's approach against the background of that speech. The Prime Minister made it a priority to fight injustice and inequality. Ultimately, we know that by focusing actions on the people, communities and localities with the greatest needs, we will achieve the best health outcomes. As the hon. Lady said, we will also reduce long-term demand on the NHS and social care services, so it is smart to focus our strategy on tackling inequality.

We need to be honest about facing up to what the sources of inequality are. Sometimes, those will make us uncomfortable. One of the most disadvantaged groups in our society is those with learning disabilities. They will live 20 years less than the rest of us. For me, that is a very uncomfortable truth to live with. Successive Governments have tried to direct resources to help that group of people, but it is still not working. That leads to the realisation that this is as much about behaviour and leadership as it is about money.

David Hanson: Putting that aside for one moment, could the Minister explain to Members of the House why infant mortality rose for the first time in 30 years in 2016 and 2017? If it is not linked to the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) mentioned, what is it linked to?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The right hon. Gentleman knows that we have made tackling that a priority. It is too early to draw any conclusions. It is the case that poverty is a big source of inequality, but we need to do more work before drawing conclusions. Having developed the evidence,

we will act. There is a reason that we have developed a national maternity safety strategy. There is a reason we are focusing resource on the perinatal phase, because we recognise it is critical. We will also continue to spend money on the healthy living supplements to give children a better start in life and to tackle some of those inequalities.

Dr Whitford: The Minister accepts in her speech that poverty is a big driver of these changes and talks about doing more, but we expect that over the next few years another quarter of a million children will be driven into child poverty. It is not a matter of doing more. In fact, the policies at the moment are making the situation worse.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I do not accept that. The real issue for us as a Government is being able to make those interventions that address the sources of inequality. It is about giving practical steps, which I will come to in more detail.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley referred to the article in *The BMJ* by Hiam and Dorling about the spike in mortality and winter deaths. She was absolutely right to highlight that. We must pay attention to emerging studies. However, using the total number of deaths can be misleading and needs to be put in the broader context. It does not take account of the ageing population and the fluctuations in population numbers. We use the age-standardised mortality rate as the accepted measure, which looks broadly stable. Clearly this is not something we should be complacent about, and we should continue to keep a very close eye on trends in those numbers.

I mentioned people with learning disabilities living for 20 years less than the rest of us. It is good that that figure has come down since 2000. Their life expectancy has risen by seven years since the millennium. We must encourage that direction of travel by supporting them to live full, healthy and independent lives. That goes to show that having better health is not just an issue for the NHS and health services, but is about having more support to get people into work and to help them to live in the community. We need to use every interface with the state to achieve that.

If we take a lifestyle approach to securing the best possible health outcomes and tackling inequalities, an individual's start in life is the beginning of that. We are focusing on pregnancy through early years and into old age to ensure that every child gets the best start and journey through the rest of their life. Public Health England is leading programmes to ensure that women are fit during pregnancy. It is leading programmes to ensure that children are ready to learn at two and ready for school at five. We want to continue to support smoke-free pregnancy, which leads to better health for children. Central to that is local commissioning driving best-quality service and interventions as appropriate.

We are obviously very concerned about childhood obesity. If we do not tackle it, it will set people up for poor life expectancy in the longer term. It is worrying to see the number of children entering school at the age of five who are already obese. We need to leave no stone unturned to achieve early intervention. Broader public education about the impact of sugar is helping, but there is much more we can do to encourage people to adopt healthier lifestyles.

Louise Haigh: Could the Minister confirm what the net change in investment in early intervention has been since the Conservatives came to power?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I cannot give the hon. Lady that information now, but I will write to her.

Alcohol is a source of poor health outcomes, so we are also doing much to tackle that. I am in dialogue with Members on both sides of the House about supporting the children of alcoholic parents, recognising that they are a particular need group. I thank those hon. Members who have been associated with that.

Dr Whitford: With Scotland having been the first place to ban smoking in public places, and now moving forward with minimum unit pricing for alcohol, will this Government consider following that lead for England to tackle alcohol?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am grateful for that point, which consideration is being given to in the Department. There are any number of tools that we could use to tackle alcohol. Probably the most important thing is to give the message that unsafe drinking is bad for the health. It is always interesting to learn from Scotland's experience, and we will keep an eye on that.

Tobacco is a major cause of poor health. It is worth noting how much progress we have made over decades to reduce the prevalence of smoking. That should lead to better health outcomes, but that has yet to be seen.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Rates of premature deaths in Hartlepool and the north-east are among the highest in the country. Other issues such as poor-quality housing, food poverty, fuel poverty and unemployment are also factors. Does the Minister agree that those factors also need to be taken into consideration?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I agree. That is exactly the point made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). Housing is probably the single most important ingredient in good health. We often talk in this place about there being a housing crisis and about the need to fix the broken housing market and get more supply. Amen. The fact that we have failed to manage the supply of housing effectively for decades is bringing bigger health challenges. We really need to crack that if we are to tackle some of these issues.

I could go on, but we are running short of time. We are seeing very good rates of improvement in health for things such as cancer, and much better outcomes for people. The direction of travel means that there are good things to report. I am grateful to all hon. Members who have approached this debate with real thought about the very serious issue of the decline in life expectancy. I am sure that we will revisit the issue, but my lasting message is that we see the method of tackling this being tackling inequalities. That is what I pledge to do.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered austerity and changes in life expectancy.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Wednesday 18 April 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

General Affairs Council: April 2018

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): My right hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lord Henley) has made the following written statement:

I attended the General Affairs Council (Cohesion) on 12 April 2018. The meeting was held in Luxembourg and chaired by the Bulgarian presidency.

The meeting was dedicated to the strategic context and priorities for post-2020 cohesion policy, and included an information session from the Commission on communicating cohesion policy.

A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union's website at:

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2018/04/12>.

The General Affairs Council discussed the future direction of cohesion policy in the next multiannual financial framework. Ministers and their representatives from member states presented their positions on the strategic context and priorities for post-2020, with a view to influencing the Commission's proposals. Member states particularly focused on efforts for simplification, harmonisation, the strategic framework for future cohesion policy, and the principle of national co-financing. I intervened to reflect on the lessons learnt from the UK's experience of implementing cohesion policy and provide some suggestions for a future cohesion policy.

The Commission provided an update on how cohesion policy has been, and could be, better communicated to the public.

The Bulgarian presidency provided an update on non-legislative and legislative items.

[HCWS624]

Ministerial Corrections

Wednesday 18 April 2018

EDUCATION

Allergy Awareness in Schools

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on allergy awareness in schools on Wednesday 14 March 2018.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Under its inspection framework, Ofsted requires inspectors to pay particular attention to children with allergies and to gather evidence about pupil welfare and how well needs are met by individual schools, and it will evaluate the experience of particular individuals and groups, including those with medical needs.

Rachael Maskell: At the moment it is completely voluntary for schools to hold an EpiPen. Will the Minister look into ensuring that all schools have such devices?

Nadhim Zahawi: Currently, governing boards have an obligation to put forward a clear strategy for what a school is doing for children with allergies. My understanding is that they have to have two EpiPens, not one—one and a spare—but I will hold a roundtable to look at what more we can do to ensure that happens in every school. [*Official Report, 14 March 2018, Vol. 637, c. 392WH.*]

Letter of correction from Nadhim Zahawi:

Errors have been identified in my response to the Westminster Hall debate on allergy awareness in schools on 14 March 2018.

The correct information should have been:

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Under its inspection framework, Ofsted requires inspectors to pay particular attention to **the outcomes**

of a range of groups of pupils. Inspectors gather evidence about pupil welfare and how well needs are met by individual schools, and it will evaluate the experience of particular individuals and groups, including those with medical needs.

Rachael Maskell: At the moment it is completely voluntary for schools to hold an EpiPen. Will the Minister look into ensuring that all schools have such devices?

Nadhim Zahawi: Currently, governing boards have an obligation to put forward a **policy for supporting pupils with medical conditions, including allergies. I will hold a roundtable** to look at what more we can do to ensure that happens in every school.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Anti-Semitism

The following is an extract from the debate on anti-Semitism on Tuesday 17 April 2018.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Last year, the Community Security Trust recorded 1,346 anti-Semitic incidents in the UK—the highest on record. [*Official Report, 17 April 2018, Vol. 639, c. 248.*]

Letter of correction from Sajid Javid:

An error has been identified in my speech in the debate on anti-Semitism on 17 April 2018.

The correct information should have been:

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Last year, the Community Security Trust recorded **1,382** anti-Semitic incidents in the UK—the highest on record.

ORAL ANSWERS

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Wednesday 25 April 2018**

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