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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 30 April 2018

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 13 JUNE 2017]

SIXTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 640

FIFTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2017-2019

House of Commons

Monday 30 April 2018

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: The House will have been as sad as I was to learn of the death of my predecessor as Speaker, Michael Martin, latterly Lord Martin of Springburn. Michael was a decent, public-spirited man who had a real care and concern for Members, their staff and the staff of this House. He was a fine campaigner and a man both passionate about, and proud of, his roots. He also had, as many Members can testify, a great sense of humour. On a personal level, he was always very kind to me. I feel sure that my experience was mirrored in the experience of a very large number of colleagues across the House. I still remember to this day the lovely and generous letter of congratulations he sent to me after my election as Speaker. My deepest sympathies go out to Mary, his children and their grandchildren. Colleagues, there will be a fuller opportunity tomorrow for Members of this House to pay tribute to Michael Martin.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr Speaker: I welcome the new Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to his place.

The Secretary of State was asked—

Affordable Housing

1. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): For what reasons his Department underspent on affordable housing schemes in 2017-18. [905022]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The affordable homes programme is a bid-led programme and spending within a financial year may vary from budget based on the number of bids. This is standard budget management practice. We are investing more in affordable homes, with an additional £2 billion provided last year, taking the programme to over £9 billion. That funding will support housing associations and local authorities to build more affordable homes where they are needed most.

Wera Hobhouse: May I add my condolences to the family of the former Speaker?

I congratulate the new Secretary of State on taking on this important role—we all know how important it is. Some £800 million was sent back from the Department to the Treasury this year. Will the new Secretary of State ensure that the Department budget is actually spent, so that we can get on with building the thousands of council homes—I stress council homes, because we all know that only council homes are truly affordable—we need for the millions of people who cannot afford their own home?

James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words and wishes. May I also associate myself with your words, Mr Speaker, on the former Speaker Michael Martin? He was the Speaker when I first joined this House, and I know what a kind and supportive man he was to hon. Members right across the House, in particular new Members. I know what a sad loss he is.

In response to the hon. Lady's question, I point to the £9 billion I highlighted and to the fact that in 2016-17 41,530 affordable housing homes were completed, which is 27% higher than in the previous year. I underline the commitment given by my predecessor, to whom I pay tribute for his work. We will continue to focus on building homes for the future, including affordable homes, and raising aspirations.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I, too, associate myself with your comments, Mr Speaker, about the late Lord Martin. He was particularly kind to

me when I arrived here after a by-election. I especially welcome the return of my good friend and constituency neighbour to the Treasury Bench, which is where he deservedly belongs.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the key to affordability is increasing supply? Does he recognise, as a fellow London MP, that the Government devolved the strategic housing pot to the Mayor of London? Does he share my concern that while housing starts in the rest of the country have risen, in London, under the current Labour Mayor, they have fallen?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the flexibilities this Government have sought to put in place to deal with the essential issue of housing, which will be a core priority for me in the time ahead. I thank him for his kind wishes. Investment and flexibility will make a difference, provided they are taken up and we have partnership across the country, in delivering the homes people need.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his place. Does his Department have any targets for the number of affordable houses? Will he promise to take a look at the definition of affordable, which is at far too high a price under this Government?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady will know that our ambition is to get building up to about 300,000 homes a year. That is the real focus and commitment of this Government. Yes, it is about affordability and it is about ensuring that people have a positive sense for the future about getting into the housing market, and that is what this Government are determined to do.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend encourage planners to negotiate higher proportions of affordable housing in new developments?

James Brokenshire: I will certainly reflect on the feedback that I receive from across the House in the days ahead. These are just the first few hours of my tenure in this role, but I will listen closely to the comments from my right hon. Friend and others, and certainly, as we look at the national planning policy framework, we will consider those matters carefully.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Although all Speakers become politically neutral, Labour Members welcome and endorse with particular strength your tribute to our former colleague, Michael Martin, as well as your condolences to Mary and the family, Mr Speaker.

I warmly welcome the new Housing Secretary; it is good to see him back. He has a big job to do and the Opposition wish him all the very best in doing it. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) was right to highlight Labour's analysis of his predecessor's pathetic surrender of housing cash to the Chancellor. It shows the new Secretary of State's real challenge: the huge cut in housing investment—from £4 billion in 2010 to less than £500 million now—and the huge fall in genuinely affordable new homes to rent and buy. Will the right hon. Gentleman at least make the modest commitment that while he is Housing Secretary, we will build more new social rented homes than we lose?

James Brokenshire: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his warm welcome to me. As he will know, it has certainly been a challenging personal few months for me, and that is why I am so delighted to have been given this new responsibility on such an important policy issue, as he rightly points out. I point him to the fact that, with the £2 billion that was added last year, this Government are investing £9 billion in affordable homes. I also draw his attention to the fact that more affordable homes have been delivered in the last seven years than were in the last seven years of the last Labour Government. We will continue to have that focus on building more homes and on building more affordable homes, too.

John Healey: The record is clear: 40,000 new genuinely affordable social rented homes were started by councils and housing associations in Labour's last year in government, and fewer than 1,000 were backed by his Government last year. Does the Secretary of State not accept that the housing crisis demands that both central Government and local government do much more? In this local elections week, will he confirm a couple of important facts? Labour councils build five times more council homes than Conservative councils, and Labour councils get 50% more homes of all types built than Conservative councils, so does he agree that to fix the housing crisis, it is clear that we need more Labour councils and more Labour councillors to be elected on Thursday?

James Brokenshire: Even Labour councils build more homes under a Conservative Government. The right hon. Gentleman does raise the important issues of housing supply, the housing challenges that we need to meet and the roles of national Government and local government. I very much look forward to working with local government to make sure that we deliver on that agenda, because that is what this country needs and what will make a difference to people's lives.

Local Government Funding

2. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure fairness in the allocation of funding to local government. [905023]

11. **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure fairness in the allocation of funding to local government. [905034]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): We are undertaking a fair funding review of local authorities' relative needs and resources to address concerns about the fairness of the current system. We are making good progress in collaboration with the sector to introduce a simple, fair and transparent funding formula.

Jeremy Lefroy: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment and welcome the news on the progress of fair funding, but will he look carefully at running more business rates retention pilots, particularly in my area of Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, as I believe they provide at least a short-term answer to unfair funding?

James Brokenshire: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I welcome Staffordshire's interest in future business rates retention pilots, and I hope it applies when the prospectus for 2019-20 pilots is issued. As the prospectus is open to all local authorities, as I think he knows, the decision on which applications are successful can be made only once they have all been considered, but obviously I will be examining the matter closely.

Alan Mak: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment. He will know that about one third of households in my Havant constituency contain an older person. Will he confirm that under his leadership the social care precepts and the better care fund will mean an extra £4 billion for social care in this Parliament, and will he continue to work with Hampshire County Council's adult services department?

James Brokenshire: I know that my hon. Friend and other hon. Members from across the House care deeply about this subject. As he will be aware, in February my predecessor announced an additional £150 million for adult social care, which means that councils now have access to £9.4 billion in dedicated adult social care funding over three years.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware—and has he had a word with the Secretary of State for Education about it—that there are schools in Coventry that cannot afford school meals provision? What is he going to do about that?

James Brokenshire: I know that there are pressures in areas such as children's social services and I am aware of the joined-up work my Department is doing with the Education Department. I look forward to talking to Cabinet colleagues about some of these overlapping issues. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will understand that, in the short time since my appointment, I have not had a chance to do that, but I will certainly be doing so.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The Office for National Statistics defines Haringey and other similar boroughs as inner-London boroughs because of their demographics and socioeconomic characteristics. Despite that, Haringey is excluded from the Government's definition of an inner-London borough. Will the Secretary of State look at that carefully in his funding review so that boroughs such as Haringey can be brought up in line with the Islington and Camdens?

James Brokenshire: I will be looking at several issues as part of the fair funding review. The hon. Lady makes an interesting point, which I will consider as part of the overall review, and I am grateful to her for flagging it up.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): The business rates retention pilot has been a lifeline to hard-pressed West Berkshire Council. Will my right hon. Friend also continue his predecessor's pledge to tackle negative revenue support grant, because that will have a huge impact on hard-pressed local authorities?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for highlighting the business rates retention pilots. We are looking at the issue he raises quite closely and will be making further announcements in the coming weeks.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I echo your lovely words of condolence to the family of Michael Martin, Mr Speaker.

I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's reappointment to Cabinet. He has two shadow Secretaries of State to contend with, and I look forward to working with him and holding him and his Ministers to account on all things communities and local government. His appointment should bring a fresh approach to the crisis engulfing local government. He will know that Tory Northamptonshire is effectively insolvent and that Tory Worcestershire is now also experiencing financial pressure, with its chief executive saying last week that

"there comes a point where cost-cutting can't go any further—there has to be a solution, and I think it has to be a national solution."

Given that the pressures on children's services and adult social care, alongside a 50% cut in their Government grant funding, are exacerbating these problems, will he now do what his predecessor failed to do and demand of the Chancellor of the Exchequer the funding that our councils—all of them—so desperately need?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. In some ways, local government is in my blood: my father was the chief executive of a council, and some of the current debates about councils are ones that I had as a boy, believe it or not.

Mr Speaker: It sounds as though mealtimes chez Brokenshire were enormous fun.

James Brokenshire: Let's not overdo it, Mr Speaker.

I hoped that the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) would welcome the additional funds that have been given to councils for core spending. They constitute an important statement from the Government, who have given councils a real-terms increase in recognition of the challenges that they face. I hope the hon. Gentleman will also note the forthcoming social care Green Paper, which will enable us to engage in a further and broader debate about long-term funding for social care.

Midlands Engine

3. **Lee Rowley** (North East Derbyshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to deliver economic growth through the midlands engine. [905024]

5. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to deliver economic growth through the midlands engine. [905026]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): In recent months, we have launched the £250 million midlands engine investment fund and agreed on a second devolution deal with the West Midlands combined authority.

Lee Rowley: I, too, congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment. Does he agree that the right infrastructure must be provided to support the economic growth to which he has referred? Although he is new to his post, may I give a quick plug to a bid from my part of the world, north-east Derbyshire, for a housing infrastructure fund to regenerate the Staveley area further, and will he commit himself to reviewing that closely when he comes to make a decision?

James Brokenshire: Obviously, my hon. Friend's particular focus is on Derbyshire. The right social and physical infrastructure is indeed vital to driving sustainable and significant housing growth, and the £5 billion housing infrastructure fund will unlock up to 600,000 homes. This is a competitive process, but I am committed to funding the projects that will have the greatest impact.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): The midlands seem to be leading the way in economic growth and job creation. Will the Secretary of State join me in celebrating, with Andy Street, the West Midlands combined authority and the midlands engine, the local achievement of 6.8% of gross value added, given that the national figure is 2.4%?

James Brokenshire: I will. Andy Street and the West Midlands combined authority have been pivotal to the success of the midlands engine. The number of businesses in the west midlands has increased by 9% since 2016, and its second devolution deal includes a £53 million allocation to prepare land and deliver jobs and housing throughout the Black country, including my hon. Friend's constituency.

One Yorkshire

4. John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of the proposal from 18 Yorkshire councils for a One Yorkshire devolution settlement. [905025]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): Last month, high-level proposals were received from some councils in Yorkshire about the so-called One Yorkshire devolution deal. We are considering those proposals carefully and will respond to the authorities in due course.

John Grogan: Does the Minister accept that it is now the settled will of the vast majority of councils in Yorkshire, and the vast majority of the people there, that we move towards a One Yorkshire devolution settlement, and will he encourage the new Secretary of State to initiate talks with the Yorkshire councils so that he will be ever remembered as the man who delivered the first elected mayor to the white rose county?

Jake Berry: The hon. Gentleman is something of a Mystic Meg of the Labour party. Unlike him, I want the people of South Yorkshire to have their say in the elections next Thursday. The Conservative candidate, Ian Walker, has said:

"This is a golden opportunity to show what South Yorkshire can do."

The Labour candidate thinks that it should be a part-time job, and the Labour authorities are fighting with each other so much that they cannot agree on what power or money the mayor of South Yorkshire should have.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): As the Minister will know, Yorkshire is a massive county—by far the biggest in the country. What assessment has he made of the ability of one mayor to cover effectively the whole of such a big county? My dad had the privilege of being the Mayor of Doncaster for a while, and that was a pretty full-on job for him, so how on earth can one

person do the job effectively and look after the interests of the whole of Yorkshire? What level of bureaucracy and cost would be incurred by a single mayoral office for the whole of Yorkshire?

Jake Berry: I would not like to be drawn on responding to the high-level proposals we have received, but I will say this: later this year, the city of Leeds will be the only core city in the north of England that has not benefited from devolution, and that is a terrible shame for everyone who lives in West Yorkshire.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Does the Minister recognise that the Humber economic area has to be included in any devolution deal for Yorkshire because of the energy estuary, which is vital to the northern powerhouse?

Jake Berry: All these devolution deals are ground-up, and if people from Hull and the Humber come to the Government with proposals for devolution for that area, the Government will of course look at them in the way that they do all devolution proposals.

New Homes

6. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What progress his Department has made on delivering more new homes. [905027]

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): Last year, 217,000 new homes were delivered, which is the highest rate in all but one of the last 30 years, but we are restless to do more and get that level up to 300,000 per year by the mid-2020s.

Sir David Amess: I join others in welcoming my right hon. Friend the new Secretary of State on his return to Government, and trust that he will not forget his Essex roots.

Conservative-controlled Southend-on-Sea Borough Council is keen to deliver as many new affordable homes as possible, so will my hon. Friend the Minister encourage local authorities to engage with innovative schemes that benefit the wider community, such as ZEDGeneration and the Ferdinand brothers legacy project?

Dominic Raab: We encourage all ambitious local authorities to be as innovative as possible, and my hon. Friend will know that in 2016 Southend council received £122,000 and Genesis Housing Association £420,000 for the regeneration of the centre of Southend, and that includes Conservative plans for more affordable homes.

21. [905046] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): City of York Council is about to submit its local plan, but has seriously undercut Government figures for the number of houses to be built and has relied on transport data that is 10 years old. So as the local plan goes through Government processes, will the Minister ensure that parties across the political spectrum, including Labour, can be part of the conversation?

Dominic Raab: We want York to get its local plan in place; that is the best thing for the community, as it gives certainty and a greater chance of those homes

being delivered. A local authority statement of community involvement is an essential part of that process and it will be tested against the statement in due course.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): My constituents recognise that we need more homes but are concerned about overstretched infrastructure and public services. What are the Government doing to ensure that those areas that are willing to build the most homes will get the maximum amount of funding for new infrastructure and public services?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is why we have brought forward £5 billion of approved funding for infrastructure funding—both viability funding and forward funding—which will unlock 600,000 new homes. The criteria are calibrated to make sure that the investment goes where there is the greatest demand for homes and where we can deliver the most homes and the best bang for the taxpayers' buck.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): When the Minister looks at new housing, will he ensure that it is actually affordable to constituents on average incomes? Will he also look at the position of leasehold homes, which are still being sold in my constituency, in spite of commitments from the previous Secretary of State, because those homes are not affordable on an ongoing basis?

Dominic Raab: The No. 1 way to improve the affordability of homes is to increase the supply, which is why our agenda is to get the number of new homes built per year up to 300,000. I looked at the Labour party's Green Paper and it seems to suggest going back in the overall number of homes delivered each year. As the Secretary of State has already said, we have delivered more affordable homes in the past seven years than were delivered in the last seven years of the previous Labour Government.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Will the Minister meet me and other members of the Right to Build Expert Task Force—one member is one of his own civil servants—so that we can brief him on the great work it is doing in increasing housing numbers and improving quality and customer choice?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We are keen to see diversity in the housing market. It will be one of the key drivers for building more homes and getting more affordable homes, and I will be happy to meet him in due course.

High-rise Buildings: Cladding

7. **Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of high-rise residential buildings that have had dangerous cladding removed and replaced. [905028]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Our first priority is the safety of residents. The remediation of buildings with aluminium composite material cladding is a complex process, and it is important that we get this right. Of the 158 social housing buildings, 104 have started remediation, and seven of those have finished the remediation work.

Andy Slaughter: With his new authority, would the Secretary of State agree that it would give more certainty and speed up the process if he were to say that only non-combustible class A1 materials should be used for external construction, as is the case in the rest of Europe? I doubt that he would live in a building that was clad in combustible or partially combustible material, so why should my constituents do so?

James Brokenshire: I understand the reasons for the hon. Gentleman making those points. At the outset, I want to underline my commitment to giving priority to these issues. This has been an utter tragedy, and our priority has to be—as it was with my predecessor—to ensure that survivors and communities receive all the support that they need. He will be aware that the Hackitt review is looking at a range of issues, and I would not want to prejudge that review, but he makes an important point and I am sure that it will be examined.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The Secretary of State has referred to his father, who was respected for his work in the Local Government Commission and the Audit Commission, and as chief executive of the London Borough of Greenwich, where, when I was there, he helped to get cladding for the Nightingale Vale tower block, enabling people to spend £5 a week to be warm rather than £30 a week to be cold. When the Secretary of State is bedded in, will he look at the problem of tenant/leaseholders in private blocks, where freeholders and others who own the freehold such as developers seem to fail to understand that tenants cannot be expected to pay the cost of recladding their buildings?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments about my father and his sense of focus and dedication as a public servant. My hon. Friend makes a point about the private sector and about landlords and those who own buildings seeking to pass on those costs. I would say clearly that the costs should not be passed on to leaseholders. They should be borne by the owners in the same way that local authorities and public sector buildings are maintaining that approach. I welcome the decision from one property developer, Barratt, to pay for remediation costs, and I hope that others will follow its lead.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): On 17 June last year, the Prime Minister said:

“My Government will do whatever it takes to...keep our people safe.”

Plymouth Community Homes says that its request for funding to replace cladding has been turned down, and it is not alone. We have heard the same thing from local authorities up and down the country. Will the Secretary of State update the House today on how many funding applications to replace cladding have been approved by his Department, to demonstrate that it is doing all it takes?

James Brokenshire: As the hon. Lady will know, I am relatively new in post, but I will investigate the specific question that she has raised and respond to her. Obviously, our commitment remains to working with local councils on this important issue.

Local Authority Finances

8. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the financial sustainability of local authorities in 2018-19. [905030]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Local government will have access to more than £45 billion in core spending power in this financial year. In addition, local authorities estimate that they will keep around £2.4 billion in business rates growth.

Jeff Smith: I watched the Secretary of State's impressive and moving speech in an Adjournment debate last week, and I know that the whole House will be pleased to see him in good health and back in his place. However, he is going to have to do better than his predecessor at supporting local government, because councils across the country are in crisis-management mode. They are raiding reserves to support revenue expenditure, and that is simply not sustainable. As Tory councils go bust, will he join me in congratulating Manchester's Labour council on its excellent financial management in the face of some of the harshest and most unfair Government cuts faced by any council in the country under the Tories and the Liberal Democrats?

Rishi Sunak: I hope that Manchester is willing to thank this Conservative Government for backing it with the resources it needs: £13 million in housing infrastructure funds, £30 million for adult social care and, indeed, a business rates pilot that is delivering £20 million, benefiting businesses across Manchester. Those are the actions of a Conservative Government who are delivering for people across the country.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): If Leicestershire was as well funded as London's Camden Council, it would be £350 million a year better off. Does the Minister agree that the only way of making good councils financially sustainable is to have a fair funding formula, with transparent formulae and up-to-date data? Will he look closely at the Leicestershire model for bringing that about?

Rishi Sunak: I could not agree more, and it was a pleasure to meet his local council to understand its model. It has a lot to commend it, and we will consider it as part of our fair funding consultation.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am pleased that Labour's Hull City Council rejected the Secretary of State's predecessor's and the local Liberal Democrat councillors' proposal to spend all its reserves, because we have seen in Northamptonshire how badly that can go wrong. Does the new Secretary of State accept that spending the reserves is an incredibly bad idea?

Rishi Sunak: It is worth pointing out that council reserves across the country have actually increased over the past few years and that it is of course for local authorities to decide what prudent level of drawing down may be possible in any given year.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The previous Secretary of State was minded to put commissioners into Northamptonshire County Council. Will the excellent Minister update the House on when that may happen and by what method the House will be notified?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for his question; I know that he is following this matter carefully, as are his colleagues from across Northamptonshire. The Department and the new Secretary of State will consider all the representations received over the past couple of weeks, and we will be making an announcement shortly, most likely through a written ministerial statement.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I wish the Secretary of State all the best in his new role and for his future health.

Despite the figures that the Minister has given, the Local Government Association says that there is a £5 billion funding gap in local government finances from 2020, and the National Audit Office says that the position is financially unsustainable. Will he therefore look carefully at the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee's recommendation about business rate retention? When business rate retention changes from 50% to 75%, instead of using that to cut public health grants and other grants, we say that local authorities should be allowed to keep the extra money so that they can properly meet the rising demand for social care for the elderly, for looked-after children and for people with disabilities.

Rishi Sunak: It was a pleasure to work with the hon. Gentleman's Committee, and I look forward to reading its report in detail.—I thank the Committee for its work. As for the quantum of funding, he tempts me to pre-empt the results of the spending review, which is due next year. That will be the time to consider his point.

Homelessness

9. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce homelessness. [905031]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Tackling homelessness is a key priority for this Government, which is why we are spending over £1.2 billion through to 2020, we have implemented the most ambitious legislative reform in decades—the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—and we will be publishing our rough sleeping strategy by July this year.

Luke Hall: I welcome the Minister's response and the update on the Government's work. Will she update the House on the progress of the "Housing First" pilots?

Mrs Wheeler: The pilots will support some of the most entrenched rough sleepers in our society to end their homelessness. We are nearing the end of a detailed implementation and planning process with the three regions, and I look forward to updating the House further in due course.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Homelessness Reduction Act came into force this month, but many councils have raised concerns that the new burdens funding that the Government have allocated

is simply not sufficient for the full implementation of the Act. The Secretary of State is new in his post, but the causes of homelessness under this Government are not going away, so may I urge him to take an early look at the Government's decision to review the funding only at the end of the current two-year period?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the hon. Lady for that rant. Unfortunately, I have a feeling that she might be—what is the word we are looking for? *[Interruption.]* Some of the most important parts of the Act will be implemented in October, so councils have six months to get their places in order.

Mr Speaker: We probably will not reach the end of the Order Paper and it would be sad to be deprived of the intellect and eloquence of the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), so if he wishes to come in now, he can.

20. [905045] **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): My hon. Friend the Minister will be aware of the excellent homeless shelter in Harlow called Streets2Homes. What measures is she taking to support local homeless shelters?

Mrs Wheeler: Homeless shelters will form part of the rough sleeping strategy we are bringing out at the end of June or the beginning of July. We expect there to be a sea change in how all the different parts of the social sector, the charitable sector and local government deal with rough sleeping and homelessness. I think my right hon. Friend will enjoy reading the rough sleeping strategy.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On behalf of the Scottish National party, I pay tribute to Michael Martin. He was the MP for Dennistoun, where I lived, and I pass on my own and my party's condolences to his friends and family and to the Glasgow Labour family, who will miss him very much.

I welcome the Secretary of State back to the Government. He is the third Secretary of State I have faced, which I am sure everyone will agree is a clear sign of a strong and stable Government.

Homelessness is soaring in England, but in Scotland there has been a 38% reduction over the past 10 years. The Minister recently visited Glasgow to discuss some of the projects happening in the city I represent. Will she tell the House a little more about what she learned on her visit?

Mrs Wheeler: That is a very useful question—a fiver is in the post. One of the reasons I went up to Glasgow is that, although homelessness and rough sleeping had been reducing for four years, there has been a blip and Glasgow and other areas were not sure why there has been an increase in rough sleeping, particularly in Glasgow. I was hugely impressed by the work being done on rough sleeping by the charitable sector and Glasgow City Council, particularly in implementing their own version of Housing First. Glasgow City Council and the charities are doing very innovative work.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Minister for her kind words. I am sure the sector in Glasgow will be pleased to hear what she has learned.

Another group who struggle to get housing and therefore end up in homelessness are those with insecure immigration status, who often have no recourse to public funds. Can the Minister tell us more about what her Government intend to do to ensure that vulnerable men and women do not end up sleeping in the streets because of the policies of the Home Office?

Mrs Wheeler: The situation differs slightly in different parts of the UK. There is Government funding for projects in England that look after people who have indeterminate national status. I honestly do not know whether the situation in Scotland is a UK matter or a Scottish matter. I will have to write to the hon. Lady on that issue.

Affordable Housing

10. **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of central Government funding for affordable housing since 2010. [905033]

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): Over the past seven years, the Government have delivered 357,000 affordable homes, more than in the last seven years of the previous Government. Last year, the number of affordable homes delivered was up by 27%.

Ruth Cadbury: The new Secretary of State skirted the opportunity to address questions on social rented housing posed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), so I will try again. In London in particular, for those on average incomes and below, affordable housing means only social rented housing—housing in which this Government are now investing virtually nothing for the first time since records began—so will the Secretary of State work with the Treasury to ensure that the Government go back to investing in social rented housing so that councils and housing associations provide truly affordable, good-quality homes and, by the way, cut the housing benefit bill that is currently going to rip-off private landlords?

Dominic Raab: I gently remind the hon. Lady that more than 10,000 local authority homes have been built since 2010, which is three times more than were built under the last Labour Government. We are investing a further £9 billion in affordable homes up to 2021; we have raised the borrowing caps on councils by £1 billion; and we are giving local authorities greater rental certainty from 2020.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): We must deliver more homes in my constituency, especially affordable ones, so I would like to plug Chippenham's housing infrastructure fund bid. Does the Minister agree that these new homes would serve as a vehicle to boost our communities with the infrastructure and services that we much need?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for that. She is absolutely right: where local authorities have the ambition to get homes built, it is right that they get support from central Government infrastructure funding,

so that we do not just build the homes that our country needs but build up stronger local communities with them.

Homelessness

12. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): If he will make an assessment of the effectiveness of steps to reduce street homelessness in Torbay. [905035]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): As part of achieving our commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and eliminate it by 2027, we are working with local authorities to deliver effective interventions. We recently launched an expert multi-disciplinary team to support local areas in reducing rough sleeping quickly. Our homelessness advice and support team has also been supporting local areas on the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer. She will be aware of the work being done by the Torbay End Street Homelessness campaign, based on a £400,000 grant from her Department for a project to examine ways to end street homelessness. What assessment has she made of the work done so far? What further support will be available to reduce street homelessness in Torbay?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for his follow-up question. We have been working with Torbay on this project, which has supported 70 rough sleepers into accommodation since its launch in December 2016. The impact of the grant programme will be evaluated. As I mentioned, we will be working closely with areas through our new team and the forthcoming cross-Government rough sleeping strategy. The team will be visiting local areas in the coming weeks to discuss this further.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: The question was about Torbay, but as the Minister's reply, perfectly properly, broadened the subject matter, it is legitimate to hear about the experience of the people of the Vale of Clwyd.

Chris Ruane: When the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) was London Mayor, he described Tory housing policy in poor areas as "social cleansing". Many of the victims of that social cleansing have ended up on the streets of Torbay, Rhyl, Prestatyn, Blackpool and other seaside towns. What specific additional funds has the Department made available to those seaside towns to deal with that appalling legacy?

Mrs Wheeler: I think the hon. Gentleman will find it is a devolved matter for the Welsh Government.

Adult Social Care

13. **Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to fund adult social care. [905036]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Through the social care precept, the spring Budget last year and the recent local government finance settlement, councils will have access to £9.4 billion in dedicated funding for adult social care over the three years 2017 to 2020.

Ged Killen: May I associate myself with your kind words on the sad passing of Michael Martin, Mr Speaker?

Does the Minister believe it is economically viable for councils to continue to use what little reserves they have left in the delivery of adult social care in their area?

Rishi Sunak: I gently remind the hon. Gentleman of my earlier answer, which was that council reserves are some £20 billion across the country and are actually higher today than they were when we came into office. Councils will be able to increase spending on social care in real terms every year up to the end of this Parliament, and we are already seeing the results in action: delayed transfers of care are down by 34% in England. This is a Government who are delivering for people across the country.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Of the 575 beds in Kettering General Hospital, about 200 are occupied by patients, many of them elderly, who have completed their treatment but await transfer to social and other care. What can be done when the local county council simply is not up to the job of making sure that social care assessments are done in a timely way?

Rishi Sunak: I am sure my hon. Friend will forgive me for not being drawn on Northamptonshire specifically, given the circumstances there and the decision to be made. In general, he is absolutely right to highlight the importance of getting people swiftly transferred to appropriate social care. That has been a focus of the funding that the Government have put in, and the better care fund is ensuring that joined-up care is happening. As I have said, delayed transfers of care are down by almost a third in the past year.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): May I ask the Minister how many local authorities his Department believes are close to not being able to carry out their statutory responsibilities for adult social care?

Rishi Sunak: None.

Northern Powerhouse

14. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What progress the Government have made on the delivery of the northern powerhouse. [905037]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): Growing the whole north is crucial to the delivery of our northern powerhouse. Since the northern powerhouse strategy was launched, direct foreign investment in the north has increased at a rate double that of the national average, and unemployment throughout the north is now lower than the national average.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for his response and extend to the new Secretary of State an invitation to come to Shields and explain to my constituents why,

when the Government launched the northern powerhouse four years ago, they promised increased growth and increased employment, yet in the time since, growth in Shields has been painfully slow and unemployment stubbornly remains higher than in the rest of the north-east.

Jake Berry: I am a bit more optimistic for the north-east than the hon. Lady, because we are now entering a new golden era for the north-east, which can be seen in the Government's commitment of more than £300 million—*[Interruption.]* Does the hon. Lady want to hear about what we are doing for the north-east? That new golden era can be seen in the Government's commitment of more than £300 million to the Tyne and Wear metro, which the hon. Lady campaigned for, and in the historic devolution deal north of the Tyne. On top of that, this summer the first great exhibition in this country for 160 years will take place in Newcastle-Gateshead, showing that the north-east is at the heart of our northern powerhouse.

17. [905041] **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Although the people of northern Lincolnshire want nothing to do with the recreation of County Humberside or being linked into Yorkshire, they are very happy to be part of the northern powerhouse initiative. What specific proposals does the Minister have that would benefit my constituency?

Jake Berry: We are already investing some £67 million in the Humber and the Greater Lincolnshire local enterprise partnership, and I note that £20 million of that is going into my hon. Friend's constituency. He will be aware that we committed in the industrial strategy to work on a business case for a Grimsby and Cleethorpes town deal. I hope that, in demonstrating that success, we can put our northern power towns at the heart of the northern powerhouse.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): There is no surprise that the lived experience of people in Shields is of growth not happening, because when the northern powerhouse was launched in 2014, Government capital spending per person was £543 higher in London than in the north-east. London has seen its investment increase to £1,352 per person but, instead of the Government's closing the gap, the north-east saw a cut in capital spending that increased the gap by 17% to £634 per person. How can the Government credibly claim to be the champions of the northern powerhouse when the evidence says that the money has not followed?

Jake Berry: I am certainly not going to take any lectures on the northern powerhouse from the hon. Gentleman, because after his election he described it as the "northern poorhouse". Unlike Opposition Members, the Government are behind the north, not least by investing £13 billion in northern transport—more than any Government in history, including the Labour Government.

Topical Questions

T1. [905047] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I am delighted to have been appointed to this new role to deliver on housing—one of the Government's top priorities is

creating great places to live. In the past few weeks, my Department has announced important plans to tackle unprofessional estate agents and rogue managing and letting agents, as well as landlords who rent out dangerous and overcrowded homes.

I applaud my Department's contribution to the magnificent Millicent Fawcett statue. The integrated communities strategy and the recent very moving anti-Semitism debate highlight the vital work being done to create a more united country, free from bigotry.

Liz Twist: I thank the new Secretary of State for his reply. Many people in Blaydon constituency feel strongly that green-belt land should be preserved, but without support for remediation it can be difficult to build houses on brownfield sites in former industrial areas, especially as the housing infrastructure grant is competitive. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to protect our green belt, to encourage building on brownfield sites and to prevent building on parks and green spaces, as Bexley Council proposes?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for highlighting the importance of the green belt, about which I agree, and I share her desire to see more development on brownfield land. Yes, there are issues relating to funding for remediation, but there will obviously be careful consideration of the national planning policy framework, too.

T2. [905049] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): The potholes in Kettering and across Northamptonshire are absolutely terrible. What role does the Minister's Department have in liaising with the Department for Transport to ensure that the millions of extra pounds that local councils have been given to fill in potholes are actually being spent and used correctly?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): My hon. Friend raises an absolutely excellent point. I know that he will welcome the Government's increased funding for pothole remediation after the winter that we have had, but I will take his point on board and ensure that local authorities are deploying those funds as quickly as possible.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): A recent survey, the first of its kind, into the working conditions of wellbeing and social workers, commissioned by the British Association of Social Workers, makes for sorry reading. Working conditions are described as extremely poor, and it is noted that nine out of 10 social workers work an average of almost 10 extra hours a week and that more than half are looking to leave the profession. What is the Minister doing to reduce the demands faced by social workers to avoid a disastrous exodus of talent and expertise?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady is right to point out the important work that social workers do across the country in caring for some of the more vulnerable in our society. I know that our colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care are examining the exact issue that she mentions, and I am sure they will be making a report in due course.

T3. [905050] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend to his well deserved position as Secretary of State; it is a good appointment.

In Crawley, Forge Wood is the newest neighbourhood currently being developed, and it will deliver almost 2,000 houses. However, the infrastructure lag from Persimmon Homes and Taylor Wimpey is too long. What can be done to encourage developers to speed up the delivery of that infrastructure?

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): I thank my hon. Friend. He will know that the Government are putting £4.5 million infrastructure funding into the Forge Wood scheme, but he is absolutely right that developers must do their bit and keep their commitments. We are looking at this both in the consultation on the national planning policy framework and in developer contributions. We want to see those developer contributions treated more like contracts for delivery and less like the starting point for an endless haggle with local councils.

T4. [905051] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The chief inspector of borders and immigration concluded in a report in March that the Government's right to rent scheme had failed "to demonstrate its worth" in encouraging immigration compliance. Other research has shown that 51% of landlords are now less likely to consider letting to foreign nationals, so when will the Minister scrap this discriminatory policy?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I will write to the hon. Gentleman.

T5. [905052] **Chris Skidmore** (Kingswood) (Con): More than 2,000 local residents signed my petition to protect Hanham cricket club from the threat of development, yet South Gloucestershire Council did not grant the site local green space designation in their policies, sites and places document due to a single objection from the landowner. Will the Minister confirm that, on its own, a landowner objection should not prevent treasured green spaces from being granted local green space designation?

Dominic Raab: The designation of a local green space needs to be consistent with the local planning framework. Landowners have an opportunity to make representations, but the final decision on designation rests with the local authority.

T7. [905054] **Laura Pidcock** (North West Durham) (Lab): I am still in a bit of shock about the announcement that it is a golden era for the north-east.

Labour's housing Green Paper highlighted how 12,000 council and housing association homes in the north-east, and almost 250,000 nationally, are classed as unfit for human habitation. Can the Secretary of State explain why his Government cut support for local authorities through the decent homes programme, which saw repairs and improvements on 1.4 million council homes?

Dominic Raab: In fact the latest figures show more people getting on to the council housing ladder. Council waiting lists have been reduced, and 95% of all local authority stock meets the decent homes standard.

T6. [905053] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): The all-party group on housing and care for older people, which I co-chair with the noble Lord Best, is launching later this afternoon its report on the housing needs of older people in rural areas, and it concludes that more work is required. Will my right hon. Friend meet the noble lord, me and the other inquiry members to consider how best to implement the report's recommendations?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for flagging up this important issue. I will certainly listen to the points that have been made, look at the report and see what consideration either I or my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing can provide to engage in its recommendations.

T8. [905055] **Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): We are facing a housing crisis in both quantity and quality. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee outlined that one way to solve it would be selective licensing. Brighton and Hove put in an application in January, but five months later we are still waiting for the Secretary of State's approval for the scheme. Will he make it one of his first acts in office to sign off the scheme, so that we can get on with improving our housing stock?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question on this very important matter. We are actually reviewing all licensing schemes across the whole country, and we will look into this one and get a decision to him as quickly as possible.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): What plans has my hon. Friend to tackle unfair leaseholds retrospectively, so that my constituents on new build estates in Offerton and Strines get a better deal?

Mrs Wheeler: My family will be delighted by how much exercise I am getting, jumping up and down.

We are committed to tackling unfair leasehold practices, which is why we are working with the Law Commission to make buying a freehold or extending a lease easier, faster, fairer and cheaper. We want to ensure that leaseholders have the right support to deal with onerous ground rent, and we will consider further action if developers' schemes to compensate individuals do not go far enough.

T9. [905056] **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Given that local services face a funding gap of at least £5.8 billion by 2019-20, when will the Minister provide an update on the roll-out of the 100% business rates retention pilots and end the uncertainty faced by Manchester City Council and Trafford Council, which cover my constituency?

Rishi Sunak: I am delighted that Manchester, like several other authorities, is a beneficiary of the Government's 100% business rates retention pilot, which is ensuring that local authorities keep an extra £1 billion this year. We will announce plans for a further round of pilots shortly after the local elections.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah, yes—the good doctor. I call Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

May I welcome the substantial central Government grants that have been made to enable Jewish buildings to be better protected? But given that three quarters of all anti-Semitic incidents happen in Greater London and Greater Manchester, will the new Secretary of State seek out the Mayors of those two cities to see what more can be done to protect their Jewish communities?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising this significant and important issue. I pay tribute to the Community Security Trust for its work in providing safety and security in this area. I will certainly engage further not just with my right hon. Friend but with local government to ensure that we continue to make progress.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): May I ask the Northern Powerhouse Minister when he expects to make a further announcement about the northern powerhouse commitment in relation to the growth deal in north Wales?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): The north Wales growth deal is primarily the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Wales. I am happy to update the right hon. Gentleman by saying that we are making good progress in looking at the proposals from local authorities. Once we have completed that work, we will make an announcement shortly about the next steps for all local authorities involved.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): There are five district councils in Warwickshire. Four are Conservative-led and one—Nuneaton and Bedworth—is run by Labour. Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council has the highest district council tax precept of the five, and one of the lowest satisfaction ratings. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that Conservative councils deliver better-quality services at a lower cost?

James Brokenshire: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a powerful and important point about the benefits of Conservatives leading local government.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Will the Minister acknowledge that youth offending teams have achieved huge success in working with and supporting young people to prevent them from getting involved in crime? Will he therefore tell me why their funding has been halved from £145 million in 2010-11 to just £72 million in 2017-18, and why councils are still waiting to receive their youth justice grant allocations for 2018-19?

Rishi Sunak: I am not aware of the particular grant mentioned by the hon. Gentleman, but I am happy to look into it and write to him in due course.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) has now twice mentioned Worcestershire County Council and Northamptonshire County Council in the same breath in this place. Unfortunately, he seems to be trying to establish a false narrative. Is the Secretary of State aware that I have met Worcestershire County Council and received assurances that its finances are on a stable footing? To suggest otherwise seems simply to be scaremongering.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend puts it very well, as she has done on previous occasions. It is not right to come to this place and scaremonger with regard to ordinary residents' services. Worcestershire is delivering, and she is right to defend it.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): May I welcome the new Secretary of State to his post and wish him well? Does he agree that no new house should be sold leasehold? There is no excuse for it. What steps will he take to help the many hundreds of thousands of people, including my constituents, who are now being financially exploited by their freeholds being sold on to dodgy characters?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the hon. Lady for her very important question. The scandal over feudal leaseholds on new build is absolutely disgraceful. We are working very hard with the Law Commission to change the rules as to how this should go forward. I am delighted to say that some developers have got the point. In South Derbyshire, we now have big signs up on new build saying, "Freehold houses for sale here".

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Harrogate Borough Council recently dedicated an additional £150,000 to tackle the root causes of local long-term homelessness. The Harrogate Homeless Project runs the initiative, which is called SAFE—Service for Adults Facing Exclusion. It has been widely praised and we are already seeing results. May I invite my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to come and visit the project to see for himself the amazing results it is achieving?

James Brokenshire: I would be delighted to hear more about this project, which sounds as though it is making a big difference. That is what it is about: delivering on the ground.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but demand has exceeded supply, as per usual. We must now move on to the next business.

Sainsbury and Asda Merger

3.36 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the proposed merger of Sainsbury's and Asda.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): On 30 April, J Sainsbury plc and Walmart Inc. announced that they had agreed terms in relation to a proposed combination of Sainsbury's and Asda Group Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Walmart, to create an enlarged business. There are no planned Sainsbury's or Asda store closures as a result of the merger. The proposed deal is conditional on clearance by the Competition and Markets Authority.

The Competitions and Markets Authority will hold pre-notification discussions with the parties and, when it has sufficient information, will commence its phase 1 investigation. Usually, a phase 1 investigation will last up to 40 working days before the authority will decide whether to clear the merger or refer it on to a detailed phase 2 investigation. I understand that the parties have requested to fast-track straight to phase 2. As part of its competition inquiry, the CMA can look at the buying power of a merged company in relation to its suppliers and the impact that the merger would have on them. Decisions about mergers are taken independently of ministerial control and are subject to legal challenge. Under the Enterprise Act 2002, Ministers have the power to intervene in mergers only on public interest grounds covering national security, media plurality and financial stability.

¹Today, the Secretary of State and I have spoken to Sainsbury's chief executive officer Mike Coupe, and Asda CEO Sean Clarke, so that we can better understand their plans. Additionally, I have today spoken to the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and Unite unions, and I will speak to the GMB union immediately after leaving here. When I spoke to Len McCluskey this morning, I made it clear that I expect Sainsbury's and Asda to conduct proper and thorough engagement with the unions. This afternoon, I have spoken to the Groceries Code Adjudicator, Christine Tacon, to reiterate the importance of ensuring that suppliers, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, are treated fairly.

The UK's merger regime is designed to offer clarity for businesses and to build investor confidence. Mergers are an important part of a dynamic economy, and the Government appreciate that they can bring real benefits to consumers and the economy as a whole by attracting inward investment. We will continue to monitor the situation closely.

Rebecca Long Bailey: The landscape for retailers has become increasingly difficult over recent years, and I am sure that the Minister shares my concerns regarding this deal, given its potential to squeeze competition in the market and the risks that it poses to workers, suppliers and consumers. He confirmed that there will be no store closures, but will he also confirm that there will be no job losses, no changes to pay, terms and

conditions, and no closure of any sites within each company's estates portfolio—distribution sites and offices, for example? If so, for how long will that promise be effective, and will he seek legally binding assurances?

It is clear that a duopoly of the big supermarkets—Tesco, and Asda and Sainsbury's—will now emerge providing never-before-seen bargaining power. Indeed, the statement this morning included a promise to bring prices down for consumers, but it is feared that that will be at the expense of suppliers, farmers and manufacturers whose prices and terms will be driven down, pushing many to the edge of collapse. Can the Minister confirm that that will not be the case? In addition, does he agree that control of 60% of the market by the duopoly may pose a risk to consumer choice and provide less incentive to entice with good offers? If so, what assurances has he received in that regard? I am sure that he agrees that an urgent CMA investigation is imperative, but can he confirm that the CMA will prevent the integration of the companies during investigation, as it is entitled to do?

The Minister will agree that many of the risks associated with this deal do not bear directly on the CMA's remit of testing whether there would be a substantial lessening of competition. As he said, he has no power to intervene directly in the merger as it does not meet the public interest tests of national security, media plurality and financial stability. Given that the deal could radically alter the whole grocery sector—from farm and factory to supermarket shelf—will he finally use his powers to broaden the scope of the public interest test to include deals of such economic and national significance, as he has been repeatedly asked to do?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the hon. Lady for her important points. I share many of the concerns that she voices, but she says that the CMA's remit does not extend to the substantial lessening of competition—[*Interruption.*] That is exactly what the CMA does. Its role is to examine competition matters—[*Interruption.*] If I misheard the hon. Lady, I apologise.

The CMA's role is to consider the impact of this merger on not just competition in the marketplace, but suppliers. The hon. Lady rightly raised the impact that the merger could have on farmers and suppliers, and that was why the Secretary of State and I reiterated to Asda and Sainsbury's when we spoke to them this morning the importance of their engaging with not just the CMA, but bodies such as the National Farmers Union and other unions to ensure that this is a proper process that we understand. The hon. Lady will know that section 172 of the Companies Act 2006 puts a duty on directors of the new company to have regard to the impact that their decisions would have on their suppliers, and we will be monitoring that very closely in the months to come.

We must also recognise, as the hon. Lady said at the very beginning of her contribution, that the retail sector is in a huge state of flux. We must all understand that the way in which consumers purchase these days is changing dramatically. There has been a 9% increase in sales through online vehicles in the last 12 months alone. That, by necessity, means that the retail sector has to change and adapt. One of the things that the merger will offer is reduced costs for the consumer, which I hope she will welcome. We all want to protect consumers and make sure they are getting great value

for money, and that is one of the things that the merger promises. I can assure her, from the discussions I have had with the CMA, the Groceries Code Adjudicator and both parties, that ensuring the supply chain is properly protected is one of the priorities and something that I guarantee we will keep a close eye on.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): The Minister said that he had a conversation with Mike Coupe about store closures this morning. Given that the CMA insisted that 53 stores were offloaded when the Safeway-Morrisons merger occurred in 2003, how can Mr Coupe give the Minister such an assurance, and what does the Minister have to say about that?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank my hon. Friend for that very important question. The reassurances I was given this morning were first that there would be no store closures and secondly that the head offices of both Sainsbury's and Asda would remain open. Those are both very positive things. My hon. Friend mentions the forced sale of particular branches, and that is clearly a matter for the Competition and Markets Authority. When Sainsbury's and Asda move on to the phase 2 investigation, they will get down to the granularity of the merger's impact on particular villages, towns and cities. If there is a feeling that it will cause a lack of competition in the marketplace, the CMA has the power, when making a decision, to force the sale of stores to competitors to ensure that there is greater competition for the consumer.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Secretary of State pointed out that the merger of Britain's second and third largest supermarket chains will need to be approved by the Competition and Markets Authority and be scrutinised by regulators such as the Groceries Code Adjudicator, which was set up to protect small suppliers. As he said, the consumers' voice is essential, and there are very real concerns that the merger will lead to reduced competition and be bad for shoppers, potentially hitting prices and the range of products available. Despite protestations to the contrary, fears remain that this could cost the jobs of the workers upon whose hard work these companies have been built. As we have heard, the Competition and Markets Authority may well demand that the combined group sells off some stores to prevent market dominance when there is both a Sainsbury's and an Asda in the same area, but that can only be bad news for consumers and employees. Does the Secretary of State agree that the merger must not be at the expense of consumers' interests or jobs, and will he commit to keeping the House updated on these important matters?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions; she raises some very important points. Sadly, my responsibilities do not yet run to my being the Secretary of State, but I am grateful for the confidence and faith that she has shown in me.

In relation to the consumer, this is at the heart of what the CMA will consider. It will look at how this merger will affect our constituents—people concerned about the price of a pint of milk or a loaf of bread—and it will be very attuned to such an impact. All the assertions made by both Sainsbury's and Asda so far show that they believe that this will lead to a reduction

in costs, and therefore a reduction in prices on the shelf. The CMA and the Government will of course be keeping a close eye on that, but Sainsbury's and Asda believe that this will lead to better prices for the consumer.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): How does my hon. Friend believe the Competition and Markets Authority will react to the situation in the middle of Dunstable, where we have an Asda and a Sainsbury's pretty much next door to each other, and also a Morrisons, a Tesco, an Aldi, a Lidl and an Amazon fulfilment centre in quite close proximity?

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend is spoilt for choice, I would say, and that is what we want to see. We want a dynamic marketplace with great competition between retailers to provide not only greater choice, but better prices. The CMA will clearly look at that—during the six-month phase 2 investigation, it will draw together all the information in relation to particular villages, towns and cities—and I confirm to my hon. Friend that if there is any concern about choice and competition in Dunstable, the CMA will act on that and, if it has to, it will force the sale of stores to competitors.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) is a regular visitor to all those retail outlets in his constituency, and doubtless those shopping alongside him are veritably delighted to brush shoulders with their local Member of Parliament.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central (Lab): Asda said this morning that it will continue to be run from its head office in the centre of Leeds, where just over 2,000 people are employed. Given that in the last few months there have been two rounds of job losses at Asda's head office, and in the light of what the Minister has just said about the merger providing an opportunity to cut costs, what assurance can he give staff in the head office that their jobs are safe?

Andrew Griffiths: The right hon. Gentleman will understand that any merger will be designed to improve efficiency, productivity and value for money for shareholders. So far, we have been given reassurances by Asda and Sainsbury's that there will be no store closures and no job losses in stores. I cannot confirm to him as yet the impact that the merger will have on the head offices, other than to repeat the confirmation that we have been given that both head offices will be kept open. However, this is a decision for the CMA. I urge the right hon. Gentleman and other right hon. and hon. Members to bear in mind that the CMA will make a decision based on the evidence. If right hon. and hon. Members have evidence to contribute, they should make their case to the CMA to ensure that it considers all this on the facts.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement. In Harlow, we have an Asda and a Sainsbury's, and many hundreds of local jobs depend on those supermarkets. Although the companies say today that there will be no job losses, my concern is that in a year or so's time, when this has all been forgotten about, hundreds of jobs will suddenly be lost

[Robert Halfon]

not just in stores, but in logistics centres, distribution centres and so on. We need guarantees that those jobs will not be lost.

Andrew Griffiths: My right hon. Friend is a doughty fighter for his constituents, and I understand that he will be lobbying hard to ensure that there are no job losses. I reassure him that some 330,000 people are employed by this joint, merged organisation. It is a huge employer. It has given us very strong reassurances about jobs in stores. I urge him to engage not only with the CMA in relation to this investigation, but with both Asda and Sainsbury's to make those points strongly and forcefully, as he always does.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister referred to the importance of online business in driving this merger. Can he explain how the CMA's terms of reference enable it properly to take into account competition between domestic bricks-and-mortar businesses and global online corporations such as Amazon?

Andrew Griffiths: Very few people know this area of competition policy better than the right hon. Gentleman. As I have pointed out, phase 2 of the CMA investigation will involve drawing together a panel that will consider all the facts about the size of the market and the impact. As part of that, they will use all their resources to ensure that they fully understand not just, as he puts it, the bricks-and-mortar marketplace, but competition from online retailers.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I welcome the recent conversion of the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) to the concept of liberal, free market competition—there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents and all that. Will my hon. Friend the Minister ensure that however the merger plays out, he will always promote diversity of provision and competition to give consumers the greatest freedom and choice?

Andrew Griffiths: As always, my hon. Friend makes his point extremely well. He is absolutely right that everybody benefits from a vibrant marketplace and increased competition. He will also understand that with my other hat on—as the Minister responsible for small business—I am keen to ensure that any merger such as this protects small suppliers and SMEs, which make up 99% of our business community and form the backbone of all our constituencies. Competition—yes, but it is hugely important that we have an eye to protecting those suppliers.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Following on from the question asked my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), Asda has been headquartered in Leeds for 50 years. It is a huge part of our civic and economic life and our infrastructure. Given the Minister's answer and the lack of assurance that he has received in his conversations with Asda and Sainsbury's, people working at the Asda head office will be incredibly concerned about their future. The industrial strategy is about rebalancing the economy away from London and the south-east. What assurances can he give that the merger will not rebalance the economy away from Yorkshire and towards London?

Andrew Griffiths: I can give the hon. Lady the assurance that I was given by both Sainsbury's and Asda, which is that both head offices will continue to be maintained. Over recent months, we have seen the real pressure the retail sector is under with the loss of some very well loved and well known high street names as the result of a very challenging business environment.

I make no comment on the validity or the veracity of the merger details—that is for the CMA to decide—but clearly what we see is two businesses trying to get ahead of the curve and futureproof themselves in a very challenging market. The hon. Lady is a doughty champion for her constituents, so I am sure she will engage with both Sainsbury's and Asda to seek further reassurances, but I can reassure her that that head office will remain open.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): For 11 years before I entered this place, I worked in the head office of Asda, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). I can therefore understand the concerns of those who work there today. The Minister cannot provide assurances about the future of the head office—indeed, I do not believe that it will be there in a few years' time.

I urge the Minister please not to view this as a merger. It is not a merger: it is a takeover by Sainsbury's, in return for 42% of stock and £2.5 billion to Walmart. That is what it is, so let us stop using false terminology to describe what is actually happening. I urge the Minister to focus on the jobs in distribution centres, many of which are in working areas of the country. If this measure goes ahead, the distribution centres will be absolutely hammered a year or two down the line.

Andrew Griffiths: I understand very clearly the points my hon. Friend makes. He may not believe it to be a merger, but this is a merger within the legal definition that will be considered by the CMA. Clearly, there will be changes to the way the business is run to make it efficient and to keep it running well into the future. The assurances that Sainsbury's and Asda have given us are that they will continue to run them as two separate businesses. I hope I can reassure my hon. Friend that, from the information we have been given, those head offices will continue.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Asda is a substantial employer in my constituency. With £500 million of efficiency savings coming down the track, will the Minister tell us what discussions he had, in the meeting with the chief executive officers, about how to protect jobs and the number of hours worked by employees? Each job loss has a massive impact on my community, which is already suffering under Tory austerity.

Andrew Griffiths: Asda and Sainsbury's believe that the way to protect those jobs is by making the business efficient, effective and able to compete and improve its market share. The shareholders will be asked to vote to approve the merger deal, so they, too, believe that—otherwise they would not vote for it.

I think the hon. Lady needs to be careful not to cause undue concern. The public assurances provided by both Sainsbury's and Asda so far are that there will be no job

losses in stores and that there will be no store closures. Clearly, the aspiration behind the public utterances from Sainsbury's and Asda is that they want their businesses to improve. The recent takeover by Sainsbury's of Argos saw efficiencies and improvements in that business that lead to more people being employed. I am responsible for any merger and competition issues, which will be considered by the CMA. I urge her to engage with, and make her points to, the businesses themselves.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. As always, I am keen to seek to accommodate the extent of colleagues' interest in an urgent question, but I remind the House that there is a further urgent question to follow this and thereafter, a statement by the Secretary of State for International Development on the situation in Syria, which, judging by precedent, I anticipate to evoke much interest. Therefore, there is a premium on brevity from Back and Front Benchers alike.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Dairy farmers in my constituency supply milk to both Asda and Sainsbury's. Will there be an easy way for those family-run businesses to be able to feed into potential efficiencies that may threaten the supply chain?

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend makes an important point—I have dairy farmers in my constituency—and this is one of the issues that I have raised with Christine Tacon, the Groceries Code Adjudicator. My hon. Friend will know that in the last few weeks, in conjunction with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Groceries Code Adjudicator and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, we have brought forward new proposals on dairy contracts to help exactly the kind of small suppliers that she talks about. In conversations with Sainsbury's and Asda, both of them talk about the very real relationships that they have with their suppliers—with their dairy farmers. I hope that we can get some assurances to protect those relationships.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Just to be clear, suppliers will not be squeezed, head offices will stay open and stores such as those in Flint, where there is an Asda next door to a Sainsbury's, will both be open in two years' time. Has the Minister sought those assurances from the companies today?

Andrew Griffiths: Let me reiterate to the right hon. Gentleman that the matter of stores in the same town will be considered as part of the phase 2 investigation by the CMA panel. It will consider the impact of the merger on individual towns. If it believes that it is anti-competitive, that it will lead to a worse deal for the consumer if the two supermarkets—one being Asda, one being Sainsbury's—stay open, and if it has concerns, it will force the sale to a competitor.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said, where there is a wider marketplace with a huge number of supermarkets, the CMA's view may well be that there is no impact on competition in the town as a result of the merger. However, it is clear that this will be judged on a case-by-case basis, to protect the individual consumers in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency and mine.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): Asda in Longwell Green and Sainsbury's in Emersons Green have been huge economic success stories in recent years, taking on hundreds of extra jobs since 2010 without Government interference. Will the Minister confirm that it is not the Government's duty to be heavy-handed about the business interests of companies, but instead to create the right economic climate that will create jobs for the future?

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we want these businesses to grow and thrive. We want a dynamic retail sector. That is why, just last month, I established the Retail Sector Council to bring together the major players in the retail industry to ensure that the Government are creating exactly the conditions that he highlights, to allow these businesses to grow and prosper. But as I said, look at the facts: the combined company will employ some 330,000 people. We as a Government want to encourage those jobs—not to get in the way and prevent them.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Although I am encouraged to hear the assurances about store closures and store jobs—I am also a former colleague at Asda—I encourage the Minister to be very careful about making assurances, particularly about Asda House, but also about jobs in distribution centres. Forces are at play that are far wider than just this merger—worrying though this is—and that will not be examined by the CMA. Specifically for me, the issue is automation in the logistics and warehousing sector, where I can imagine about 80% of jobs no longer existing in the future. That would particularly hit the north-east of England, south Wales and other areas that have become dependent on these jobs. As well as looking at this issue, the Government need to look more widely at those broader trends. Is the Minister going to do that?

Andrew Griffiths: I knew that the UK was a country of shopkeepers, but I had not realised that so many Members had retail experience in our supermarkets; it is encouraging to have such a well-informed debate. The hon. Lady raises issues about the supply chain and distribution sector. Clearly, that is not within the scope of the CMA investigation. The Enterprise Act 2002 clearly sets out the role that the Government and Ministers can play in relation to takeovers and mergers, and it is important that we stick to those established rules. That is what we will be doing in this case.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Following on from the Minister's last comments, it is right that concerns be raised about jobs and consumer choice, but will he confirm that producers will be able to provide evidence to the CMA on the potentially devastating effect of this concentration of market power through this market consolidation?

Andrew Griffiths: Not only can I confirm to my hon. Friend that producers' voices will be heard in the CMA deliberation—this six-month detailed process that will consider all the aspects, vertical and horizontal, of the merger—but I positively urge him to go back to his constituency, engage with his dairy farmers and small suppliers, and make sure they contribute to it to guarantee that their voices are heard.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I hear what the Minister says about the dairy industry, but this is not just about the small producer; it is about the relationship between the producer, the processor and the retailer—and that has been a poisonous relationship for decades. How will this increased concentration at the retail end help that relationship?

Andrew Griffiths: Clearly, the hon. Gentleman has a great deal of experience in this area—I know that his constituency was badly affected by the foot and mouth outbreak and that he did a very good job at the time. The correct formula for finding a resolution for his dairy farmers and the supply chain is through the Groceries Code Adjudicator. She has proved to be incredibly effective in standing up for the supply chain—not just for the small dairy farmers, but for the wider industry. If he has concerns, I know she will take them very seriously, so I urge him to take them up with her.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Today's announcement will be of concern to staff at Sainsbury's store support centre at Ansty Park, in my constituency, where they are engaged in buying, design and merchandising—functions that came up to the midlands from London. I had the opportunity to visit the site a couple of years ago. Will the Minister reassure those staff that they will have an opportunity to make representations to the CMA?

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Huge strides forward were made in getting these jobs out of London and further north, and I know he has done a very good job in representing employees' views. I can reassure him that their voices will be heard. He should convene a meeting, talk to the workforce and encourage them to contribute to the CMA inquiry.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I draw the House's attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a member of the GMB. I met members of the GMB in Asda in my constituency last year and other retail workers represented by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and Unite. Does the Minister understand the concerns in Cardiff, given the loss of almost 1,000 jobs in the last year at Tesco House in Cardiff, which affected many of my own constituents, and given that his Government's own analysis on Brexit shows it will hit the retail and food and drinks sectors extremely hard in all the scenarios?

Andrew Griffiths: I understand the hon. Gentleman's points, which is why one of the first things I did after being made Minister was to pick up the phone to the union representatives he talks about. We want to make sure that employees' voices are heard and that there is proper engagement over the merger. It is clear, though, that in no way is this a response to Brexit. These are businesses based in the UK and competing in the UK, and the business will continue to be listed on the London stock exchange post the merger. I recognise the hon. Gentleman's concerns, which he raises on behalf of his constituents, but perhaps we should stop playing politics with Brexit.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The town of Kettering has a large Sainsbury's and a large Asda. If this merger goes through, what Kettering shoppers and supermarket employees want to know is: will we still have both stores in two years?

Andrew Griffiths: I think that what Kettering's shoppers and workers want to know is first that they have choice and competition and secondly that those jobs are protected. If both supermarkets are thriving, either the Competition and Markets Authority will decide that there is no competition issue and allow the merged company to continue to run both, or it will say that there is a competition issue and that it has concerns for my hon. Friend's constituents, and it will force one of them to be sold to a competitor who will, hopefully, run it just as effectively.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): May I press the Minister on the question of distribution depots, which Mr Coupe has chosen not to protect? I remind the House that many of the distribution sites were established because of the decline in manufacturing, to replace manufacturing jobs. What assurances will the Minister seek from Mr Coupe and his fellow directors to guarantee that the jobs remain in those difficult areas?

Andrew Griffiths: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman has made. He is clearly concerned about those jobs. There are a number of distribution jobs in my own constituency, Burton being at the centre of the country and well connected.

Let me make two points. First, the number of supermarkets being serviced will be the same, so the number of lorries, distribution outlets and goods being shipped will also be the same. Secondly, I have no power over the issue of jobs in relation to mergers. The Enterprise Act 2002 limited such powers. While we can have conversations, I urge the hon. Gentleman to do the same to protect those jobs.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Having previously been a supplier to both companies, I read about the proposed deal with much interest. Can my hon. Friend confirm that the implications for all parties will be considered—particularly the implications for the smaller regional food producers?

Andrew Griffiths: Let me say again that, as the Small business Minister, I am particularly attuned to that issue. I think that all of us, as consumers and as parliamentarians, want those small food producers—those artisanal businesses—to grow and thrive. Both Asda and Sainsbury's have given assurances that they want to continue those important relationships. However, the Competition and Markets Authority, within its powers, will consider the impact on the supply chain.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Does the Minister think that this is a good deal or a bad deal for British farming?

Andrew Griffiths: I think the hon. Lady will understand that it is a deal that must be considered by the shareholders of both Asda and Sainsbury's. It would be inappropriate for me as the Minister, given my role, to pass judgment on its validity or veracity.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The Minister said that he had had discussions with the National Farmers Union. Many in the agricultural sector already think that the large supermarkets have too much power over buying and prices. What assurances can the Minister give the farmers, growers and food

producers in my constituency—[*Interruption.*] What assurances can the Minister give them that they will be able to work on a level playing field and obtain fair prices for their produce?

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend can hear for herself the support that there is in the House for the suppliers, growers and farmers in her constituency.

Let me clarify one issue. I did not say that I had spoken to the NFU; I said that I had urged both Sainsbury's and Asda to engage with the NFU to understand the position properly. As I have said, the CMA will be concerned about the impact on the supply chain, but, just as important, the Groceries Code Adjudicator will also be there to champion the small producers to whom my hon. Friend has referred.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Sadly for the Minister, here is another question from a Member who started his working life in a supermarket—luckily, probably, only as a butcher in Tesco, but there we are.

Does the Minister agree that it is unacceptable to keep workers waiting until 2019 for certainty about their jobs, as indicated in the CMA's statement? What will he do to try to improve the process as soon as possible?

Andrew Griffiths: I can honestly say that Tesco's loss is the House's gain.

I recognise that this is an uncertain time for workers—that is why we have engaged with the unions to try to give them as much reassurance as we can—but this is clearly a complicated and complex process. These are huge businesses, and we need to understand properly the impacts that the merger will have—not just on jobs in those businesses, but on the supply chain and competition throughout the country. While I am keen for us to secure a resolution as quickly as possible, I think that, unfortunately, we must let the process run its course.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): A new Asda store recently opened in Raunds; that has been particularly welcome for my constituents because of the positive impact it has had on petrol prices. What timescales does the Minister envisage for this process and is he aware of any impact on portfolio investments?

Andrew Griffiths: Those are important questions. If there is a phase 1 investigation, that will take 40 days. As I have said, both parties are urging the CMA to consider a fast-track approach. If it does that, phase 2 could be completed in six months. I can reassure my hon. Friend that the CMA will take very seriously the other issues he raises.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I know from my union experience that supermarkets are powerful both as employers and along their supply chains. They must not be allowed to abuse that power. Does the Minister understand the dismay of employees about this announcement that came out of the blue, and will he act to ensure that the guarantees given by the two

supermarkets, about which he has waxed lyrical today, are not just day-one guarantees, but can be counted on by workers in the years to come?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his concern and recognise his passion as a previous trade union representative. He asks about the validity and veracity of the assurances given so far by Sainsbury's and Asda. It is early days—we are not even at day one into this process—so we will see how that develops. On his aspiration that we protect the farmers and small suppliers, I gently point out that it was this Government who introduced the Groceries Code Adjudicator and brought in those tough measures and protections to help our farmers and the supply chain.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Four of the five major retail supermarket sites in Torbay are occupied by either Asda or Sainsbury's, and the two stores are right next to each other in Paignton. What reassurances can the Minister give me that communities and local councils will be able to feed in their views to the CMA, to ensure that competition at a local level is preserved?

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend raises important points, and I know that his constituents will be concerned. I can assure him that the CMA will take representations. If he would like to meet personally with the CMA, I would be delighted to try to help facilitate that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Foss Islands Sainsbury's and Asda are also adjacent to each other, and staff will have woken up this morning to hear the announcement not from their employers but on the radio. What is the Minister doing to ensure staff get the support now that they need?

Andrew Griffiths: We have engaged with Sainsbury's and Asda to urge them to speak to their staff, and we have also engaged very openly and honestly with the trade unions. We want to see proper and early engagement and consultation in this process to ensure that the workforce is protected, but the public assurances that both Sainsbury's and Asda are giving at present are that all the stores, and all the jobs in the stores, will be protected.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): We know in takeovers and mergers of this nature that, as sure as night follows day, it is the workers who end up paying for the efficiency savings that have been set out. I have to say that, given the number of assurances the Minister has talked about today, I think attacks on terms and conditions are almost inevitable. When that happens in two years' time, what will the Minister do?

Andrew Griffiths: The rules under which we operate in relation to mergers and takeovers were established in the Enterprise Act 2002 under a Labour Government. They have worked well and allowed businesses to grow, develop and merge to the benefit of both shareholders and the employers. The Department is, of course, closely following what is going on, but decisions in relation to this merger are for the CMA.

Windrush

4.19 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Prime Minister if she will make a statement on the Government's handling of the Windrush crisis.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I am honoured to have been asked this morning to become Home Secretary. I start by making a pledge to those of the Windrush generation who have been in this country for decades and yet have struggled to navigate through the immigration system: this never should have been the case, and I will do whatever it takes to put it right.

Learning about the difficulties that Windrush migrants have faced over the years has affected me greatly, particularly because I myself am a second-generation migrant. Like the Caribbean Windrush generation, my parents came to this country from the Commonwealth in the 1960s; they too came to help to rebuild this country and to offer all that they had. So when I heard that people who were long-standing pillars of their communities were being impacted for simply not having the right documents to prove their legal status in the UK, I thought that that could be my mum, my brother, my uncle or even me. That is why I am so personally committed to, and invested in, resolving the difficulties faced by the people of the Windrush generation who have built their lives here and contributed so much.

I know that my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), felt very strongly about this, too. Mr Speaker, please allow me to pay tribute to her hard work and integrity and to all that she has done and will continue to do in public service. I wish her all the very best. I will build on the decisive action that she has already taken. A dedicated taskforce was set up to handle these cases; more than 500 appointments have been scheduled, and more than 100 people have already had their cases processed and now have the necessary documents. We will continue to resolve these cases as a matter of urgency.

We have made it clear that Commonwealth citizens who have remained in the UK since 1973 will be eligible to get the legal status that they deserve: British citizenship. That will be free of charge, and I will bring forward the necessary secondary legislation. We have also been clear that a new compensation scheme will be put in place for those whose lives have been disrupted. We intend to consult on the scope of the scheme and we will appoint an independent person to oversee it. I hope that I can count on the full support of all hon. Members to make this happen as soon as possible. I end by making one thing crystal clear: we will do right by the Windrush generation.

Ms Abbott: I congratulate the Home Secretary on his new position occupying one of the great offices of state and thank him for coming to the House to answer this urgent question after what must have been quite a busy morning.

Is the Home Secretary aware how ashamed many British people are about the Windrush scandal, how frightened and angry the Windrush generation and their families are and how the scandal has resonated

around the Commonwealth? He talks about the Windrush generation getting the legal status they deserve, but actually they were always British. They were always British citizens.

Is the Home Secretary aware that this is a matter not just for the Windrush generation and Commonwealth citizens from the Caribbean? The plight that befell the Windrush generation could also affect Commonwealth citizens who came here from south Asia and west Africa. What steps does he intend to take to protect later cohorts of Commonwealth citizens from the indignity and humiliation that the Windrush generation have had to suffer?

The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that it was the Prime Minister, as Home Secretary, who introduced the Immigration Act 2014, which removed Commonwealth citizens' protection from deportation. The new Home Secretary has been part of the Government's immigration implementation taskforce. Was he aware of the problems being caused to Commonwealth citizens? Was he aware of the warnings in an internal Home Office impact assessment? Was he aware of the warnings from the previous Communities and Local Government Secretary that the "costs and risks" involved in the "hostile environment" would "outweigh the benefits"? Will the new Home Secretary commit at the very least to reinstating the protection for Commonwealth citizens that was removed by the current Prime Minister in 2014? What progress has been made in identifying Windrush people who have been deported, detained or improperly refused re-entry? We will also soon want to know more about compensation and its levels.

The Windrush generation was my parents' generation. I and most British people believe that they have been treated appallingly. The Home Secretary will be judged not on the statements he makes this afternoon, but on what he does to put the situation right and to get justice for the Windrush generation.

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Lady for her kind remarks at the start. She asks whether Members are aware of just how angry so many people from the Windrush generation are. Of course we are aware. My predecessor was aware and the Prime Minister was aware, which is why they rightly issued apologies for the treatment of some members of that generation. I am angry, too. I shared with the right hon. Lady just a moment ago just how angry I am and the reasons why I am angry. Like her, I am a second-generation migrant, and I know that she shares that anger, but she should respect the fact that other people share it, too. She does not have a monopoly on that.

The right hon. Lady asks whether I am aware that the same issues could—I stress "could"—have an impact on other Commonwealth citizens, perhaps people such as my parents and others from south Asia who settled in this country. I am aware that that could be the case and I intend to look at that carefully. Right here and now, though, all the cases that have come up relate to the Windrush generation of people from the Caribbean who settled in Britain. That is why they are rightly the focus.

The right hon. Lady claims that protections were removed in 2014, but no such protections have been removed. People who arrived pre-1973 have the absolute right to be here, and that has not changed.

The right hon. Lady asks whether I am aware of anyone who may have been wrongly deported. I am not currently aware of any such cases, but I stress that intensive work is being done right now in the Department, going back many years and looking at many individuals, so I will keep the House updated on that.

The right hon. Lady closed her remarks by rightly reminding everyone that her parents were members of the Windrush generation. My parents were also part of the generation of migrants who came to this country in the 1960s. I hope that she can work with the Government to help those people.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Notwithstanding my sadness at my right hon. Friend's predecessor's departure, may I unreservedly welcome him to his new position as Home Secretary? He is absolutely right to have divided the subject clearly. Those who were wrongly taken up in the drive to get those who are here illegally out of the country should have their rights restored; they should be dealt with appropriately and helped accordingly. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is also right, for very good reasons, to pursue those who are here illegally? *[Interruption.]* Actually, many of them are abused by the people who traffic them over here. What happened to the cockle pickers in Morecambe bay and many others was the result of illegal migration that had not been cleared up. Will he therefore show his determination both to sort out the Windrush generation and help them and to continue to ensure that illegal migrants are taken away?

Sajid Javid: I welcome my right hon. Friend's warm remarks. I very much agree with him that our first priority is to help those members of the Windrush generation who have been affected. I also remind people that there is a separate issue of illegal immigration, and everyone in the country expects us to deal with that.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I welcome the Home Secretary to his place and congratulate him on his appointment. It is only right to acknowledge the fact that he is the first person from a black and minority ethnic background to hold the office of Secretary of State for the Home Department.

I also acknowledge that the Home Secretary's predecessor has done the right thing in resigning, given the circumstances in which she found herself. It was her misfortune to preside over a mess of the Prime Minister's making. Although I have my political differences with the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), I wish her all the best for the future.

A mere change of personnel at the Home Office will not resolve the underlying causes of the Windrush scandal. What has happened to the Windrush generation is not an accident, nor is it a mistake or the work of overzealous Home Office officials; in fact, it is the direct result of the unrealistic net migration targets set by the Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary and of the "hostile environment" created on her watch. It is the Prime Minister who created the fundamental reasons for the Windrush scandal. If the policies that she put in place are not changed by the new Home Secretary, we will have more disgraceful instances of maltreatment of people who have every right to be in the United Kingdom. EU nationals in particular are concerned about what awaits them after Brexit, for all the fine words of assurance.

I therefore have the following questions for the new Home Secretary. Will he commit to a root-and-branch review of the immigration policies that have led to this disaster? Will he commit to an evidence-based immigration policy that, in the words of the director general of the CBI, puts people before numbers and works to benefit our economy and society? Will he look seriously at the concerns of EU nationals living in the UK? And will he look at the clear evidential case for the devolution of powers on immigration to the Scottish Parliament, in recognition of Scotland's particular demographic needs?

Mr Speaker: While it is always a pleasure to listen to the mellifluous tones of the hon. and learned Lady, who is a distinguished practitioner at the Scottish Bar, I hope I can be permitted gently to point out that she has nearly doubled her time allocation.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): She gets paid by the minute.

Mr Speaker: She does not get paid by the minute. *[Laughter.]* I remember one very distinguished lawyer in this place in the last Parliament who I rather fancy had been paid by the word.

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) for her kind remarks about my predecessor. She asked a number of questions, but she started by saying it is not just about a personnel change. Of course, it is not; it is about action and having the right policies, and that is certainly what she will see from my Department.

The hon. and learned Lady talked about the kind of immigration policy she would like to see. I commit to a fair and humane immigration policy that, first, welcomes and celebrates people who are here legally—people who have come in the past or who are looking to come, and who want to do the right thing and contribute to our country—and what they have to offer our great country, but that at the same time clamps down decisively on illegal immigration.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I assure my right hon. Friend that he will receive very strong support from Conservative Members in his new job, which I am sure he will find stimulating and challenging in equal measure. Can he give some more detail on the progress of the special taskforce set up in the Home Office to deal with the Windrush problems? Clearly, the best way to remove the anxiety that so many people are feeling is to ensure that the taskforce gets on with its job quickly and gives people the assurance that they are getting the rights they have always deserved.

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. The taskforce was set up on 17 April and it has already looked at a number of cases. It has received some 6,000 calls, of which we estimate some 2,500 fall into the category of the Windrush generation. They are all being dealt with by an experienced case officer in a sympathetic way. More than 500 appointments have been scheduled and more than 100 cases have already been successfully resolved.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new post and the statement he has made about supporting

[Yvette Cooper]

Windrush families, whom we all agree have been shamefully treated, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said. Given the number of Home Office decisions that were got wrong in these Windrush cases, is he concerned about a wider culture of disbelief, about whether a net migration target is distorting decisions and about the lack of checks and balances in the system to prevent injustice? As well as responding to the questions the Select Committee sent on Friday, will he look again at reinstating independent appeals and legal aid to prevent injustice in future, because this is not just about a fair immigration system; it is also about the kind of fair country we all want ours to be?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Lady for her remarks. I look forward to working with her, particularly on the work she does as the Chair of the Select Committee, and to the scrutiny that she will no doubt continue to provide. She asked a number of questions and I will take a lot of that away and think about it a bit more, if she will allow me. On targets, there were some internal migration targets and I have asked to see what they were before I take a further view on them.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): May I say to my right hon. Friend that if he does as well in this as he did on leasehold in his previous job, everyone will be grateful? May I also say to him that where people of my generation, who might have been Windrush generation, have been on the electoral roll for 30 or 40 years, it should be up to somebody else to prove that they were not on the roll by right? If they were on it by right, they should be assumed to be legitimate, resident citizens here and there should be no case of trying to prove where they were 14 years ago or 34 years ago. They were here; they are British; and they should be accepted as such.

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks. I know Home Secretary sounds very similar to Housing Secretary, but it is Home Secretary. He is right about making the right assumptions. The taskforce is making the process of helping some people to find the right documentation a lot quicker, and this is being done in a way where we are able to act much more subjectively, taking into account all the evidence that has been put in front of us.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): May I add my welcome to the Home Secretary in his important role? Will he help to clear up the question about who knew what and when about Windrush deportations by publishing in the House of Commons Library the report prepared by the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), in 2016, following meetings he had with Caribbean Ministers, because apparently this was copied to the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary at the time?

Sajid Javid: I will consider the right hon. Gentleman's request.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): My right hon. Friend has forcefully made it clear that he shares the desire of his two predecessors to resolve this issue as swiftly as possible. Does he agree with the Windrush

constituent who spoke on Radio Kent this morning to indicate that, although he was going to find it difficult to provide the necessary documentation, he nevertheless recognised that as a legal migrant he wished to control illegal immigration into this country?

Sajid Javid: I did not hear that interview this morning, but, from the way my hon. Friend explains it, I very much agree with that analysis.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Given the comments the Home Secretary made over the weekend and repeated today about how he felt at the treatment of the Windrush generation, is he able to give an assurance to the 3 million EU citizens who have also been legally living here, in some cases for many years, that none of them will go through the same experience as they apply for settled status just because they are not able to provide all the documentation the Home Office requests from them?

Sajid Javid: I do not want any person who has legally settled here, whether from Europe or any other part of the world, to go through the same experience.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give serious attention to the introduction, as soon as reasonably possible, of not only secondary but primary legislation, to deem that all those caught up in this deeply regrettable omission, which has built up over decades, will have the same legal status as those who benefited from the provisions of the Immigration Act 1971, while at the same time controlling all illegal immigration?

Sajid Javid: I refer my hon. Friend to the comment I made earlier, when I said that I will do whatever is necessary to help, which means considering all legislative options, if necessary.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State further on legal aid? Is it not the case that at the very moment at which people who had a perfectly legitimate right to be in this country were facing a hostile state, the means by which they could secure advice, advocacy and representation was removed from them? Will he ensure that nobody who now faces a similar situation will be denied the opportunity to get such advice and help?

Sajid Javid: I listened carefully to what the hon. Lady said, and she makes an important point about legal aid more generally and when it can and cannot be provided. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice is currently conducting a review of legal aid. A consultation is open and the hon. Lady should contribute to it.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment and pay handsome tribute to his predecessor.

The Windrush scandal really should not have taken us by surprise: it is the natural consequence of a system that has as its default position an assumption that a person is here illegally, with the onus being on the applicant to prove that they are here legally. That is the problem. A person has to prove that they are who they say they are and have a right to be here. Too often in offices, as a result of policy—let us not shift the blame—the default position is that the computer says no. Will my right hon. Friend undertake to have a radical rehaul of

all these policies, so that we shift the onus back on to the state to prove that a person does not have a right to be here?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for her remarks. I can make this commitment to her. We need to make sure that when dealing with inquiries from the public, the immigration system behaves more humanely and in a more fair sense, and that it takes more into account what I would call the obvious facts, rather than just asking for a piece of paper to prove everything. I will look into the matter very carefully.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I say to the new Home Secretary that it is not that, as he says, this could be happening to a wider group of people than those in the Windrush generation, but that it is happening, and it is because of the “hostile environment” policy, the cuts and pressures in his Department and the cuts to legal aid, discretion and appeals. How many people are his Department aware of who have been wrongfully deported or detained? In the midst of last week’s discussions, we were told that the Home Office was going to scrap the net removal target that has been at the heart of this argument; will the Home Secretary commit now to removing it?

Sajid Javid: First, if the hon. Gentleman knows of any cases of other affected people of which he thinks my Department might not be aware, please will he make me aware? He asked whether I am aware of any cases of wrongful deportation; I am not currently aware of any cases of wrongful deportation. He talked about the so-called hostile environment; let me say that hostile is not a term that I am going to use. It is a compliant environment. I do not like the term “hostile”. The terminology is incorrect and that phrase is unhelpful, and its use does not represent our values as a country. It is about a compliant environment and it is right that we have a compliant environment. The process was begun under previous Governments and has continued. It is right that we make a big distinction between those who are here legally and those who are illegal.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his new position, but share my regret that we have lost the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), a parliamentarian of the highest calibre, from the Cabinet. Given the devastating impact on the lives of the Windrush generation of getting this policy or its implementation wrong, will he commit to ensuring that we do not repeat these mistakes with EU citizens on whose skills our country also greatly relies, plus develop a people-focused immigration policy that welcomes the contribution and skills that this country will need now and in the future?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my hon. Friend on the contribution that EU citizens have been making for many decades to our country, and that they continue to make. That is why I am absolutely committed to following through on our commitment so far that those who want to stay can stay that we make that as easy as possible for them and that we celebrate their contributions.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Secretary of State pledges a fair and humane immigration policy. Will he put those words into action by ending the practice of brutal mass deportations by charter flight?

These secretive flights are routinely used to send people to countries from which they may have fled in terror for their lives or with which they have little or no connection. Given the Home Office’s poor history of decision making and that it is almost impossible for people to appeal from abroad, does he agree that this cruel practice should end?

Sajid Javid: What I commit to is making sure that, at all times, our immigration policy is fair and humane. If the hon. Lady wants to write to me about what she thinks needs to be done, I will look at it.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his new job, though I wish that the circumstances of his elevation had been different. We need a new immigration policy for after Brexit. May I urge him—I believe that I speak for everyone on the Conservative Benches—to put his own stamp on that policy? We want to see the policy of the Home Secretary, one of the four great offices of state, and if that means retiring some legacy policies then so be it.

Sajid Javid: Having worked with me in a previous Department, my hon. Friend will know that in every Department in which I have worked, I have almost certainly put my own stamp on it.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): There is no question but that the commitment to get net migration down to the tens of thousands led to the “hostile environment” that affected the Windrush people. The Prime Minister recommitted the Government to that policy on 8 May during the previous general election. It seems inconceivable that she would make such a policy statement and then pay no attention to how that policy was delivered. I do not expect the Secretary of State to have the details now, but can he write to me, and put a copy in the Library, of all the occasions when that has been on the agenda when his Department has met the Prime Minister to discuss how to deliver reducing net migration to the tens of thousands?

Sajid Javid: I would be happy to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his new job. He is absolutely right to focus his attention immediately on righting the wrong that has happened to the Windrush generation and the terrible way in which some of them have been treated, and I cannot think of anybody better to do the job than him. Will he also assure the House that he will not use this issue as a Trojan horse, like the Labour party has, and go soft on illegal immigration? Once people have gone through the full process and through the court system and are found to have no reason to be here, there should be a target for removing them from the country, and that target should be 100%. Anyone in this House who does not think that is out of touch with the vast majority of people in this country.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend rightly says that we should focus on the immediate issue of helping in every way we can those from the Windrush generation who have been affected; we share that determination. He also rightly pointed out that helping in every way we can those people who are here legally is perfectly consistent with having a compliant environment that ensures that everyone has to abide by the same rules on immigration.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): The Home Secretary has a golden opportunity to turn the page on a toxic debate around immigration in this country, so he should dump the net migration target or at least take students out of it. Why do we not focus more on how we better integrate immigrants who come to this country, rather than attack them? The right hon. Gentleman said that he is the son of an immigrant—I am too—but what is he actually going to change and do differently from his two predecessors? All the warm words are great, but what will he do differently to stop this happening again?

Sajid Javid: With respect, I have had only about seven hours in the Department. If the hon. Gentleman gives me a little more time, I will set out what I am going to do.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on becoming the first Muslim Home Secretary. Having worked with him, I know that there is no one better to sort out this mess. I also pay tribute to his predecessor, who did the very honourable thing.

Does the Home Secretary agree that we need to remember while sorting out this mess that it is due, in no small part, to the last Labour Government's illegitimate open-doors immigration policy? Many of us at the time warned that the policy would trigger huge problems for those who had come here happily and settled here as citizens; and so it has come to pass. Does he also agree that the Conservative party should take no lectures from the Labour party, as we have given the country its first woman Prime Minister, second woman Prime Minister and first Muslim Home Secretary?

Sajid Javid: As always, I very much agree with my hon. Friend.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new position. He will get the unanimous support of this House if he really does sort out the terrible legacy of the Windrush situation, but will he also look at the nitty-gritty of the immigration department? All Members who deal with immigration cases day in, day out get so fed up—as do our constituents—with lost passports and lost letters. It is just incompetence. If the Secretary of State can get a grip on that sort of detail, things will really improve.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is quite right to point out the importance of looking at the detail. All hon. Members hold surgeries and deal with our constituents' cases, but our constituents really should not have to come to us with such issues. They should be dealt with properly and fairly through the system, and I will be looking at that very closely.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I welcome my constituency neighbour to his new position. Does he agree that he needs to use his competence and managerial skill to get a grip on the detail of the Windrush situation and resolve it quickly—but, at the same time, to develop and ensure that we maintain a focus on controlling illegal immigration into this country as we move towards Brexit?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. He once again points out the important distinction that must not be lost between legal migration and illegal migration.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Home Secretary for his response to the urgent question and wish him well in his new position. What steps will he be taking to reassure migrants from other parts of the Commonwealth, and will he proactively make staff and time available to assist those people with any problems that they are experiencing?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about other members of the Commonwealth, to which I referred briefly a moment ago. I want to ensure that we are looking at this carefully to see whether we need to take further steps where people are affected. The hon. Gentleman will know about the taskforce that we set up for the Windrush generation. I will not hesitate in taking any further steps that would help.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to his new role. Like him, I have an immigrant background. I am not a second generation, but a first generation, immigrant. The fact that we are both sitting on these Benches is a testament to how open and welcoming our country and, in fact, our party is to new immigrants. In the Secretary of State's previous role, he would have been overseeing plans this year to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Empire Windrush arriving in the UK, so he knows that this is not just an immigration issue, but a communities issue. Will he tell us of any opportunities that he may see for cross-departmental working to ensure that this situation does not happen again?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to point out that there is a huge amount to celebrate about the Windrush generation, with the 70th anniversary of the arrival of MV Windrush occurring this June. My previous Department has done a huge amount of work on that, and I hope to work closely with it to make sure that we have the very best celebration we possibly can to show people from that generation exactly what they mean to this country and how much we respect everything that they have done for us.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new role and recognise his achievement as the first British Asian to be appointed to one of the four great offices of state.

On 17 April, I asked a named day parliamentary question of the Home Secretary's predecessor requesting the number of Windrush citizens who have been denied or charged for NHS treatment. The answer was due a week ago, but it has not arrived. Will he please now tell the House how many of the Windrush generation have been charged for or denied NHS treatment? One such case would be one too many. What is he going to do about it?

Sajid Javid: First, I thank the hon. Lady for her opening remarks. I do not have the information she has requested. I am sorry that she has not received the reply to her named day PQ. I will certainly look into that when I go back to my office.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment. Having worked closely with him, I know that he will do a diligent and good job. I welcome his statement. He is absolutely right. The Windrush generation have every right to be here legally. They are British citizens. My constituents expect that everything that can be done will be done to make sure that we regularise their legal position. My constituents also expect this Government to tackle illegal immigration. I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend gave them reassurance on both fronts.

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend's constituents an assurance on both those issues. We will absolutely do everything we can, and go much further if we have to, to help in every way with the problems that some members of the Windrush generation are facing. At the same time, we will maintain our policies around illegal migration, because that is exactly what the British public wish to see.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The new Home Secretary does not like the phrase, "hostile environment", but it came from his boss, the Prime Minister. It was she who presided over the immigration targets, she who introduced the "Go Home" vans, and she who allowed the Home Secretary's predecessor to make a speech at the Tory party conference about targeting companies taking on foreign workers. That is the "hostile environment" that this Government have created. When will the Prime Minister accept personal culpability for Windrush and the net effect of the hostile environment?

Sajid Javid: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the phrase "hostile environment" actually existed under successive Governments and began under a previous Labour Government. But this is not about which party introduced a phrase; my point was that I do not like the term, "hostile", and I will not be using it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Given the level of interest, the House's propensity for rehearsed mini-speeches as prefaces to questions needs today to be curtailed. I am looking for short, preferably single-sentence inquiries. I am looking, in fact, in the direction of the author of the textbook on the matter, the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), but I do not know if he was standing. No. What a pity: he could have educated colleagues.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I will have a go.

Mr Speaker: Well done—very well done indeed! Splendid fellow!

Sir Desmond Swayne: While I know that the Home Secretary favours the word, "compliance", some of us believe that hostility to lawbreaking is a proper response.

Sajid Javid: I think we both agree that we must have a compliant environment.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Unlike the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), I welcome the Home Secretary's rejection of the "hostile environment" policy. It has affected many alongside the Windrush generation. More than 30,000 students,

mostly from the Indian subcontinent, had their visas cancelled midway through their studies because of allegations, which I believe are largely untrue, of cheating in the test of English for international communication. I will write to him about their plight. Will he undertake to look carefully at the case of TOEIC students?

Sajid Javid: Yes.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Just as my right hon. Friend did in his previous Department in fighting anti-Semitism, looking after the victims of Grenfell and championing affordable housing, will he make social justice a defining part of his mission in his new role, so that something like the Windrush saga can never happen again?

Sajid Javid: I can make that commitment. Every part of this Government is committed to furthering social justice, and that will be at the heart of my Department.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): To follow on from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), such is the chaos of our immigration system post the Windrush crisis that a gentleman called my office this morning asking whether he was going to be "Windrushed". He arrived here from Italy in 1967 at the age of seven. What does the Home Secretary want to say to him?

Sajid Javid: First, I am sorry that the gentleman whom the hon. Lady refers to has those concerns and that anxiety. No one wants anyone to suffer in that way. I do not know if she has already passed the details to my Department, but if she does, I will certainly look at that.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): As a Kent MP, I fully recognise the mixed blessing of the UK as an attractive place to live for migrants, both legal and illegal. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the Windrush generation and all cases dealt with by the Home Office will be treated with humanity and compassion?

Sajid Javid: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new post. It is rumoured that there will be a chartered flight this week deporting people back to Jamaica. Can the Home Secretary confirm whether a flight is scheduled, and if so, whether there will be any individuals on that flight from the Windrush generation?

Sajid Javid: I can tell the hon. Lady that I am not aware of any such information, but I will take a close look.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): The Windrush scandal is appalling—there is no doubt about it—but there seems to have been some wilful conflation here, not helped by the crashing irony of the shadow Home Secretary talking about my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd) not being on top of her brief. Will the Home Secretary outline to me and others in Plymouth what exactly is wrong with a compliant policy—I know he does not like the word "hostile"—on illegal immigration, which is what we want to see from this Government?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that the answer is absolutely nothing. It is right that we have a compliant environment when it comes to immigration, and in fact when it comes to all laws, to make sure that those laws are enforced. It is not just the right thing to do for everyone in the country, but it is particularly right for migrants who come here legally and wish to settle in our country. They also want to know that that is the correct route and that those who are here illegally will be dealt with.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): First, from the daughter of a Pakistani migrant to the son of a Pakistani migrant, mubarak upon your appointment.

DCLG played an integral part in the implementation of the “hostile environment” policy under the right hon. Gentleman’s watch. Can he outline exactly what he did to resist that? Can he confirm that he now has permission to bring the axe down on his own Prime Minister’s shocking and shameful legacy in the Home Office?

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for her opening comments. She talks about the compliant environment. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 and the Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act 2006 were introduced not by this Government but by the previous Labour Government. Many Governments have been working consistently to make sure that we have a compliant environment.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new role. Having worked with him, I know what a good, compassionate and caring man he is, and I know he will make an excellent Home Secretary.

The Windrush generation and their children, some of whom sit in this House, have made an enormous contribution to the making of modern Britain. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must all do more to celebrate and communicate the enormous role that they play and have played over the years? With that in mind, will he agree on his first day in the job to meet with me, or even better visit with me, Paul Reid, the director of the Black Cultural Archives, based at 1 Windrush Square in Brixton, to discuss the excellent work it does not just in the community but for the nation?

Sajid Javid: That sounds like a very worthwhile invitation. I very much agree with my hon. Friend that the contribution made to this country by the Windrush generation is immeasurable, and we should all celebrate that when it comes to the 70th anniversary.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Will the Secretary of State assure me that the targets about which we have all heard so much and, although he does not like the term, “hostile environment”, are not being used to encourage civil servants and officers to pursue people who are legally in this country and are British citizens, but who are now—like a constituent of mine who has been affected—being asked to prove once again that they are entitled to the passport they already hold?

Sajid Javid: I refer the hon. Lady to the comment I made a moment ago, because it is just as relevant: there were some internal migration targets, but before I comment further, I would like to take a closer look at them and form a view.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new position. The actions taken by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd) were widely welcomed by the high commissioner of Barbados when he met the Home Affairs Committee last week, but the Home Secretary’s predecessor accepted that there was an issue with confidence in the measures put forward. What does my right hon. Friend think all Members across the House can do to ensure that the Windrush generation have confidence to come forward and to believe that the system will work for them, not against them?

Sajid Javid: I will continue to look at what further measures we can take to build confidence in the measures put in place, particularly the hotline and the taskforce. One thing we have made very clear, and I am happy to repeat it now, is that any information provided by anyone who comes forward—whether they call the hotline or come to one of the centres covered by the taskforce—will be used for no other purpose than that of helping them with the issues they face.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Given the focus of Conservative Members on illegal immigration, does the Home Secretary wish to comment on the fact that under his Prime Minister’s “hostile environment”, which has seen so much injustice done to the Windrush generation, we have seen the Government’s total failure to achieve what they set out to achieve, with neither voluntary nor enforced removals having actually increased in recent years?

Sajid Javid: No, I do not wish to comment on that question, because it was just political point scoring and not serious in any way.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): From his earliest days as a Member of this House, my right hon. Friend has spoken out uncompromisingly against all forms of anti-Semitism. What will he do to encourage some other people in some other parts of this House to follow the fine example he has set?

Sajid Javid: In my previous role as Communities Secretary, I obviously had a big role to play—I was privileged to do so—in fighting race and hate crime of all types. In my new role as Home Secretary, I will work very closely with my successor to make sure that we are fully co-ordinated in fighting hate crime and that we look carefully, particularly with regard to anti-Semitism, at what more we can do.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new position, but let me give him some advice: whether the term is “hostile” or “compliant”, it is deeds not words that matter in this place. Three families who came to my surgery at the weekend have Windrush generation family members who have been deported from this country, so he has to be aware that there is a serious issue with deportation. He has told us how many people have called the hotline, but these families could not get through, so will he tell us how many members of staff there are? What will he do specifically to get legal advice to people who have already been deported, so that we can truly have justice for the Windrush generation?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady asks me about the taskforce. I understand that more than 50 officials are working on it, and we can increase that number if necessary. They are dealing with all the calls as they come in, and they have set up appointments for face-to-face meetings. As I said earlier, 500 appointments have been scheduled and 100 cases already resolved. If we need to add further resources, we will. If any member of the public who is listening wants to know, the number for the hotline is 0800 678 1925.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to his position. My constituents want to know not only that the taskforce is doing its job and reaching out to encourage people to get in touch with the Home Secretary, but that the Government are using all the resources at their disposal to find out about registration for national insurance, electoral registration and registration for council tax to help people prove that they have been in this country for a long time.

Sajid Javid: I assure my hon. Friend on that front that officials and Ministers have been looking carefully to see what else can be done to help with finding appropriate documentation. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration has already had meetings with other Departments to try to achieve just that.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary confirm that the Windrush generation and others have more than two weeks to apply for British citizenship and that fees will continue to be waived until the Windrush generation issues have been fully resolved?

Sajid Javid: I am not aware that there is a completely inflexible deadline by which people can make applications. I want to take a closer look, if the hon. Lady will permit me to do so. I have not had enough time to look at the detail of every aspect of the matter yet, but I will take a closer look and get back to her.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his new position and on launching it with such power and style with his statement today. Does he agree that it is vital that we ensure that any compensation scheme is designed in consultation with those affected?

Sajid Javid: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is important that we do not rush to judgment about how the compensation scheme should work and that we listen in particular to those who have been affected. That is why it is right to have a consultation on the compensation scheme.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): In my surgery this morning, I saw a young asylum seeker who came to the UK nine years ago aged 15 and is still awaiting indefinite leave to remain. He has attempted suicide twice. I also saw a grandmother who came here from Barbados in 1970 aged 10, and who is still waiting and hoping for British citizenship. Does the Secretary of State accept that the Government's failures on immigration policy go way beyond the Windrush scandal, and is he determined to tackle all aspects of discrimination and excessive delay by his Department?

Sajid Javid: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I am determined to tackle all aspects of this and make sure that we deal with everything as quickly as we can.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment, and I commend the speed at which the Home Office taskforce has, over the last week, assisted my constituents in applying for their permit cards. Given the advancing age of some of the Windrush generation, will he confirm that any reimbursement for travel to immigration centres will cover the most appropriate form of travel for the needs of an individual, especially as they get older, rather than just the cheapest option?

Sajid Javid: We have already confirmed that any out-of-pocket expenses, including travel costs, for any individual in relation to the work of the taskforce will be reimbursed. I am glad that my hon. Friend has highlighted the issue of speed. To reassure people who call the hotline and come to the taskforce, I make it clear that of the 100 cases I have mentioned that have already been resolved, most were resolved on the same day.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): In just two of many cases, the already deported Zielsdorf family from Laggan and my current constituents the Felbers in Inverness were deported, or threatened with deportation, on the basis of highly technical conditions or abrupt rule changes, without notification, during attempted compliance. Will the Secretary of State look into the role that the Government's hostile targeting has played in those families' unfair treatment, which has caused great distress to our highland community?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman mentions a couple of cases with which I am not familiar. If he wants to send me details, I shall take a closer look.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to his position, to which he brings his own particular personal insight and integrity. I also welcome the new fast-track system and wish to report that my constituent, who was thrown out of Uganda in 1973 and had a very hard time, has, as a result of the new system, been fast-tracked through and is delighted with his treatment. I have high hopes that he will be confirmed for ever to remain in Taunton Deane. Is it not right and essential that we have an immigration policy that is fit for the future, respects people's rights and encourages aspiration?

Sajid Javid: I agree with every word my hon. Friend says.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): How would the new Home Secretary respond to this quote, which is not from me but Anthony Bryan of the Windrush generation, who spent 50 years in the UK, followed by five weeks in a detention centre? He said:

"I feel like I helped bring down the Home Secretary...I feel sorry for her in a sense, because it looks like she is taking the punishment for Theresa May."

Sajid Javid: I am not aware of all the details of Mr Bryan's case, but I know it is being or has been dealt with and prioritised. If he knows anyone else who is in a similar situation, he should encourage them to contact the hotline.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the waiving of the citizenship fee will apply to individuals who have documentation as well as those who do not?

Sajid Javid: I can confirm that.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Some people think that there is a link between political rhetoric that is hostile to migrants and hate crime. What does the Home Secretary believe?

Sajid Javid: I have seen no evidence of such a link. If the hon. Lady thinks there is and has some evidence, I will happily look at it.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I join colleagues in welcoming my right hon. Friend to his new post. The children of the Windrush generation who are in the UK will in most cases already be British citizens. Can he confirm that where that is not the case they will be able to apply to naturalise at no cost?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can confirm that.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary to his place and the commitments he has made this afternoon on fairness and justice. Will he offer that commitment to constituents who have already been deported, particularly my constituent who was deported two weeks ago in spite of his partner being 34 weeks pregnant at the time? He was in the process of an appeal and there were no papers to deport him.

Sajid Javid: Clearly, no one should be wrongfully deported—of course not. If the hon. Lady has any details—forgive me if she has already shared them with the Department—I will certainly take a very close look at them.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State's personal commitment to the Windrush generation, but any credible immigration policy must distinguish between those who are here legally and illegal immigration. Is it not striking that there is an absence of policy on illegal immigration from the Labour party?

Sajid Javid: I am glad my hon. Friend points that out. I very much agree with him about making that distinction. I believe the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) was asked just this morning, in a number of interviews she gave, what would be the policy of the Labour party, and she had no answer.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), it says on the Government's own website that the Windrush citizens have two weeks to "regularise their immigration status". Will the Secretary of State look urgently at removing that statement from the website—it says that they have only two weeks—and give them a lot more time to deal with this situation?

Sajid Javid: I am looking again at that deadline.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Similar to the Windrush situation is the plight of the Chagos community, who were exiled from the British Indian Ocean Territory under the Wilson Administration. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me to look at my British Indian Ocean Territory (Citizenship) Bill, which is currently before the House, with a view to righting this injustice?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of the Chagos community, and I will very happily meet him.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The Windrush generation built Birmingham and Britain only to be treated shamefully in the twilight of their years. This is a national scandal for which the Prime Minister must take personal responsibility. Will the Home Secretary clarify his earlier remarks about the compensation scheme? After 50 years in this country, Gloria Fletcher lost her job. As a consequence, she and her husband Derek are now deeply in debt. Given what the Home Secretary said, it looks like they might have to wait many, many months for compensation and justice. When will they finally see that justice delivered?

Sajid Javid: I think that I speak for the whole House when I say that we all want the compensation scheme in place as soon as possible. I hope that the hon. Gentleman agrees that it is right that we first consult on it—I hope to set up the consultation very quickly and to get input in particular from people who have been affected, including perhaps his constituents and others—to make sure that we are right on the detail and that the scheme properly compensates all those who have been affected.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to his new position. Does he agree that there is absolutely no question but that the Windrush generation have a right to stay? However, that does not reduce the need for, or the importance of, policies that act as strong deterrents to those who are trying to enter the country illegally or are currently here illegally.

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my hon. Friend about the need to clearly articulate the distinction between those such as the Windrush generation, who have every right to be here and need to be helped in every way with this difficult situation, and the need to maintain a strong, compliant environment to ensure that our immigration rules are followed by everyone.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): My constituent, Gretel Gocan, had lived in the UK for 30 years when she was wrongly denied re-entry after visiting Jamaica for a family funeral several years ago. Arrangements are now being made for Gretel to return home to the UK. Her health is fragile and her family would like her to be able to travel this week, but they are struggling to raise the £972 cost of the flight. Will the Home Secretary confirm that the travel costs of repatriating Windrush citizens who have wrongfully been denied entry to the UK will be met by the Government so that Gretel's family can bring her home this week?

Sajid Javid: If the hon. Lady sends me details of that particular case, I will take a closer look at it.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Will the Home Secretary assure the House that he will do everything in his power to make sure that nobody faces unnecessary delays or costs for NHS treatment in the future, as we saw in the case of Albert Thompson? Will he meet me to discuss the wider policy so that other people do not face unnecessary delays in the NHS as a result of our policy on visas for NHS staff?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue and I very much agree with what she says. What happened to Albert Thompson was completely unacceptable. We do not want anyone else to be in that situation, and I will very happily meet her.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister received a letter from the former Home Secretary on 30 January 2017 apprising her of her continued work on the immigration policy. The Prime Minister is therefore complicit in all that has taken place. Is not the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd) merely a scapegoat for the Prime Minister?

Sajid Javid: My predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye, was a fantastic leader of the Department. She did some great work that I hope to build on.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Key to putting wrongs right will be the work of the new Windrush hotline, which has already responded very quickly to my efforts to help one of my constituents to get British citizenship. There is a wider opportunity for my right hon. Friend to recognise the migrant contribution to our nation, so may I invite him in principle to come to an event at the Gloucester history festival at which we will celebrate the arrival of the Empire Windrush this September?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend can invite me in principle.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be inviting the Home Secretary to deliver an oration, rather than simply to sit there decoratively.

Richard Graham *indicated assent.*

Mr Speaker: I am sure that that will entice the Home Secretary.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It appears from the outside that the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd) left her post in part because of incorrect briefings and because papers were not sent to her, or were sent to her but not seen. May I ask the new Home Secretary, in all sincerity, whether he plans a root-and-branch review of the Home Office to decide whether it is fit for purpose in the long term?

Sajid Javid: From what I have seen already of the Home Office, I can say that I am lucky to have such a strong and professional team, but of course improvements can always be made in any Department, and I will be looking carefully to see how I can do that.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I warmly welcome the Home Secretary to his post—I know the whole team at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will greatly miss him—and also welcome the rapid action that has been taken to right the injustice that the Windrush generation have suffered. They are, of course, as British as any of us. When it comes to people here illegally, however, does he agree with the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, who, when shadow Home Secretary, said we needed proper enforcement and proper action to combat illegal immigration?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I do.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that there is a vital distinction between the Windrush generation, who came to this country as British citizens, and tackling illegal immigration? As such, will he reject any calls for an amnesty on illegal immigration, which would only encourage traffickers and undermine those seeking legitimate routes to citizenship in this country?

Sajid Javid: I agree with my hon. Friend. No one in the Department is talking about an amnesty. It is right that we welcome those who are here legally, but maintain a strong, compliant environment for those here illegally.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome my former colleague from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to his new role. It is a delight to see him in his place today. I also welcome his comments about ensuring this matter is resolved quickly. Can he reassure me that he will work with local councils regarding records that they have that might help members of the Windrush generation to prove that they have been living here and their eligibility to remain?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. He will know that I love working with local councils and I will continue to do so in my new Department. Local councils have a role to play in our immigration policy, particularly in helping those from the Windrush generation.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his historic appointment. Will he assure the House that, as his Department engages with the Windrush generation, it will look expansively and sympathetically at the types of records and documents that it will accept as people build a picture of their time here, so that these issues can be resolved quickly?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. The taskforce is already looking sympathetically at requests for documentation, which is why it is able to resolve many of the cases within days.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that once the consultation on compensation has been finalised, an attitude of generosity will be applied and his Department's famed proactivity and alacrity will be brought to bear when deploying the compensation scheme?

Sajid Javid: I agree with my hon. Friend. I look forward to discussing the issue of generosity with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his wonderful new position. The Windrush generation, like many others, were a generation of pen, paper and hard-copy documents. On the decision in 2009 to do away with those hard-copy documents, will he, when he has a quiet moment, look back and see why no decision was made to back them up, in a computer age, and how that decision was brought about by officials or those leading the Department at the time?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes an important point that deserves to be looked at.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary to his new post. Will he assure the House that his primary focus will now be on giving practical assistance to those who need help?

Sajid Javid: My most urgent priority now, as I enter this Department, is to continue to build on the work set out by my predecessor to help the Windrush generation as quickly as I can, and in every way that I can.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's ground-breaking appointment. Does he agree that while a humane immigration policy demands that we take action on the Windrush generation, it is not inhumane to act on the legitimate concerns of ordinary working people about illegal immigration in this country?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, who has reminded the House of an important distinction. This is about acting correctly and fairly in respect of those who are here for all the right reasons and are helping to make our country strong, while at the same time cracking down on illegal immigration.

Syria

5.30 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Let me take this opportunity to put on record that the aid workers who have been attacked in South Sudan are very much in our thoughts. Aid workers should never be a target, and I am sure that the whole House will want to send our good wishes to them and their families at this difficult time.

I want to update the House on the United Kingdom's support for the people of Syria. I am keenly aware that Members are deeply concerned about the level of suffering experienced by millions of Syrians. The United Kingdom has shown, and will continue to show, leadership in the international humanitarian response.

In the eighth year of the conflict, the plight of the Syrian people remains grave. The Syrian regime appears to have no intention of ending the suffering of its own people, although the opposition have placed no conditions on peace negotiations. The barbaric attack in Douma on innocent civilians, including young children, was yet another example of the regime's disregard for its responsibility to protect civilians. Some may seek to cast doubt over the attack and who was responsible for it, but intelligence and first-hand accounts from non-governmental organisations and aid workers are clear. The World Health Organisation received reports that hundreds of patients had arrived at Syrian health facilities on the night of 7 April with

"signs and symptoms consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals." Regime helicopters were seen over Douma on that evening, and the opposition do not operate helicopters or use barrel bombs.

Assad and his backers—Russia and Iran—will attempt to block every diplomatic effort to hold the regime accountable for these reprehensible and illegal tactics. That was why the United Kingdom, together with our United States and French allies, took co-ordinated, limited and targeted action against the regime's chemical weapons capabilities to alleviate humanitarian suffering. Britain is clear: we will defend the global rules-based system that keeps us all safe. I welcome the support that we have received from Members and from the international community. We will work with the United Nations and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to create a new independent mechanism to attribute responsibility for chemical weapons attacks. We will work with France on the International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons, and we will work with the EU to establish a new sanctions regime against those responsible for chemical weapons use.

In wielding its UN veto 12 times, Russia has given a green light to Assad to perpetrate human rights atrocities against his own people. This is a regime that has used nearly 70,000 barrel bombs on civilian targets; a regime that tries to starve its people into submission, although the UN Security Council has called for unhindered humanitarian access; a regime that has continued to obstruct aid to eastern Ghouta and removes medical supplies from the rare aid convoys that do get in; a regime that deploys rape as a weapon of war, with nearly eight out of 10 people detained by it reported to have suffered sexual violence; and a regime that deliberately bombs schools and hospitals, and targets aid workers and emergency responders as they race to the scene to help.

We must support the innocent victims of these atrocities. All warring parties must comply with the Geneva conventions on the protected status of civilians and other non-combatants. There must be an immediate ceasefire, and safe access for aid workers and medical staff to do their jobs.

We also want to adapt what we do to the new reality of this war. That is why I have announced the new creating hope in conflict fund with USAID, to work with the private sector to find new technology to save lives in conflict zones. Britain will establish a humanitarian innovation hub to develop new capabilities to hinder regimes that appear determined to slay innocent men, women and children.

Our aid has made a difference. Despite the horrific violence meted out by Assad, we have been able to prevent mass starvation and large-scale outbreaks of disease. When we are able to reach the people who need our help, our aid works. We are the second largest bilateral donor to the humanitarian response in Syria. Since 2012, our support has provided over 22 million monthly food rations, almost 10 million medical consultations and over 9 million relief packages. But the suffering continues. Some 13.1 million people are now in need of humanitarian assistance. Over half of Syria's population has been displaced by violence, with nearly 6 million seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. In north-west Syria, an intensification of hostilities and the arrival of an additional 60,000 people from eastern Ghouta is stretching scarce resources. Today, 65% of the population of Idlib—over 1.2 million people—have been forced from their homes.

At last week's conference, I announced that the UK will provide at least £450 million this year, and £300 million next year, to alleviate extreme suffering in Syria and to provide vital support in neighbouring countries. This will be in addition to our support for the second EU facility for refugees in Turkey. We have now committed £2.71 billion since 2012, our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis.

Our pledge will help to keep medical facilities open to save lives. We will deploy protective equipment to keep medics and rescue workers safe. We will deploy antidote stocks to treat any further victims of chemical weapons. We will train doctors and nurses to treat trauma wounds. We will focus on education, making sure that every child in the region has access to quality education even in the most trying circumstances, on steps to protect civilians and on ensuring that those responsible for attacks face justice.

We will help to support the millions of Syrian refugees sheltering in neighbouring countries. Our friends in the region—Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey in particular—continue to demonstrate extraordinary generosity by opening their doors to millions fleeing the conflict in Syria. We must continue to offer them our fullest support. Last week, I also announced that the UK will host an international conference with Jordan in London later this year. It will showcase Jordan's economic reform plans and aspiration to build a thriving private sector, and mobilise international investment.

There are refugees who cannot be supported in the region: people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, and women and children at risk of exploitation. We will work closely with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to identify those most at

risk and bring them to the UK. We are helping but, with Russia's support, Assad continues to bomb his own people, and that is why so many continue to die and so many have fled their homes.

There can be no military solution to the Syrian civil war. As UN special representative Staffan de Mistura said in Brussels last week, the Assad regime risks a pyrrhic victory unless it and its backers engage in a genuine political process. Only this can deliver reconciliation and the restoration of Syria as a prosperous, secure and stable state. The UK will continue to support the efforts of the UN, under the Geneva process, to this end.

The obstacles remain serious. The regime has shown no inclination to engage seriously so far, and the Security Council remains divided. But the international community cannot, and should not, resign itself to failure. The costs for Syria, for the region and for the wider international rules-based system are too great. The Foreign Secretary was in Paris last Thursday to discuss with key partners how we should intensify our efforts to bring this conflict, and its causes, to an end. While we actively work to find a political solution, the UK will continue to stand alongside the people of Syria and the region to do what we can to alleviate human suffering and to demand immediate access for aid workers to all those who need our help. I commend this statement to the House.

5.40 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, and I thank her for giving me advance sight of it. Let me join her in expressing my anger at the attacks on aid workers in South Sudan. Let me also congratulate her on her appointment today as Minister for Women and Equalities.

The war in Syria has gone on for more than eight years, and 100,000 civilians have died, 1 million have been injured and 12 million displaced. For all our differences, I believe that we in this House are united in our desire to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Syrian people and, as fellow humans, to help to bring an end to their suffering.

Turning first to money, I welcome the fact that last week the UK pledged £250 million more in new funding to help Syria. That can sound like a lot, but the truth is that last week's pledging conference in Brussels raised less than half the \$9 billion needed. It also raised less than was raised at a similar conference this time last year. Indeed, Mark Lowcock, the UN's emergency relief co-ordinator, has warned that we have a \$5 billion shortfall and that the UN will now have to make hard choices. The Prime Minister of Lebanon, where 25% of the population are refugees, has warned that his country remains "a big refugee camp". Without enough funding, tensions are rising in Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Jordan, so will the Secretary of State say more about how the UK intends to help to fill that remaining shortfall and about what plans exist to increase our own contribution? Given that delays have been reported in the United States' pledge and that pledges from the Gulf states have so far been less than was hoped, what assurances can she give the House that she is putting extra pressure on those others also to come to the table?

It is not all about the money, however—it is not enough just to get the chequebook out. Without a political solution, our aid budget will only ever have a limited impact, so what are the Government doing to

[Kate Osamor]

show political leadership in securing a ceasefire? After they ignored the UN and joined US airstrikes, will the Government now recommit to a joint multilateral solution to peace through the UN, even if that seems difficult? Let us remember that, a fortnight ago, this House debated the decision by the Prime Minister to bomb Syria without even coming to this House for a vote. We were told then that the action was intended to alleviate human suffering. Will the Secretary of State tell us whether her Department ever carried out an assessment of the likely humanitarian impact of the airstrikes before they were authorised by the Prime Minister?

Opening the chequebook overseas counts for nothing unless we also live up to our responsibilities to Syrian refugees here in the UK. The Government promised to take 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020, yet the UK is taking just 4% of the number of refugees received by Germany, and the numbers across European countries are dwarfed by those in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq. We are not even able to hit the Dubs amendment target of 3,000 children, and that is pitiful.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) also reported recently that his constituents were unable to host and help Syrian refugees because of the logistical and bureaucratic hurdles set up by the Home Office. That pattern is being replicated up and down the country. If the Government can prioritise targets to remove people from this country, why are we not able to hit a simple target to let in a handful of refugee children from countries such as Syria? Will the Secretary of State please sit down with the new Home Secretary and urge him to remove these barriers straight away so that we can, at the very least, hit the UK's very modest targets for resettling Syrian refugees and children?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her warm words at the start of her response. We are doing many things to ensure that we and the international community have the funding we need to alleviate the immense suffering being endured by the Syrian people. The first part of our contribution is obviously asking others to lean in, so my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East and I have been asking other nations to do that. We obviously heavily co-ordinate our efforts with UN agencies and with their asks. We are also leading the charge on reforming the humanitarian system. We lose about \$1 billion a year globally because the system does not work efficiently, so if we can get it to work better, we will have more money to deploy where we need it.

We are also helping in other areas. To give one example, I was recently in Jordan looking at the costs of healthcare; particular prices must be paid for vaccines for refugees. We are looking at the specific cost issues for the countries that are shouldering an immense burden and at what we can do to try to alleviate those costs or to get more sensible pricing systems in place.

We are also working with the multilateral system; as the hon. Lady will know, the capital replenishment of the World Bank was a huge success for the UK's development goals. That formed part of our desire to ensure that the countries that are shouldering burdens, specifically Jordan and Lebanon, have their contributions

taken into account when decisions are being made. I am pleased to be working with the president of the World Bank and Bill Gates on being human capital champions and on ensuring that all multilaterals are making decisions about which nations are stepping up and not only funding their own people, but supporting refugees from other nations.

The hon. Lady mentioned the UN, and we all know about the problems we have with the Security Council and Russia's veto. We must find other ways of working and to encourage people to come to the table, and we have to put pressure on Russia and Iran to play their parts in getting the situation resolved.

As for the air strikes, their purpose was to degrade and deter the use of chemical weapons, as the hon. Lady knows. The vast majority of Members across the House recognise why they were a good thing for the people of Syria, for our own safety and for trying to ensure international norms. One reason why we are not able to share information with the House in advance of such strikes is that we can only make the judgment to which she referred when we know what the targets are. We can only make a judgment about whether a strike will be legal, effective in its objective and compliant with our targeting policies if we know what the targets are, and we cannot share that information with the House for understandable reasons.

We have chosen to support millions in the region. We are taking a number of refugees into the UK, but we are supporting millions of individuals not just with the basics of life, but by trying to ensure that they have some kind of future, particularly with our investment in education. Since I became Secretary of State, I have set up several new groups with the Home Office, both recently and last year, to consider issues in which there is Home Office interest, including the administration of the situation of refugees. For example, if people caught up in the Rohingya crisis have relatives here, we are trying to be proactive and to ensure that we are doing everything we can to get sensible things to happen.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I must express disappointment that, while rightly damning the monsters in the Syrian Government, my right hon. Friend still has nothing to say about the maniacs—the jihadists—who lead most of the armed opposition. Can she tell us whether this aid will be supplied only to displaced Syrians outside Syria or, if it will be supplied to Syrians within Syrian territory, whether it will be supplied to Assad-controlled territory, to territory controlled by the armed jihadist opposition or to territory controlled by the only people we have ever been able to support militarily—the Kurdish-led Syrian democratic forces? Those forces are currently under attack from Turkey, which she has just described as one of our friends in the region.

Penny Mordaunt: Turkey is a key NATO ally—I hope my right hon. Friend would want me to describe it as such—and it is supporting an enormous number of refugees. I very much understand his concern on this issue. The way we distribute aid is based on need, and we obviously have protections to ensure it is distributed as it should be. The main obstacle to that happening is access to particular areas, but aid is not being given to terrorist groups and it is not being abused in that way.

Most of the armed opposition are now dead. Back when we had the vote on the Floor of the House in 2013, there were 12 groups that nobody could describe as extremists or terrorists, and they were the best hope for a peaceful and good outcome to this situation. We are now faced with a situation in which Assad will continue his campaign, despite no restrictions being put on negotiations by the opposition groups. The only peaceful outcome in Syria will be with the consent of all parties, which I am afraid does not point to Assad remaining there.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. I wish her well with her new ministerial responsibilities, and I associate the Scottish National party with her words on the aid workers in South Sudan.

The Syrian conflict is making the Schleswig-Holstein question look positively simple by comparison, but there are a number of questions that I hope the Secretary of State will be able to help me with this evening. Can she tell us a bit more about the new sanctions she has announced? Will they target the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre and the network of shady bank accounts connected to it? Will she seek to address the large imbalance between the number of UK and EU sanctions and the number of sanctions brought in by the US Treasury? The US Treasury has almost 300 sanctions, but I understand there are fewer than 30 from the United Kingdom.

Can the Secretary of State tell us how she plans to strengthen the chemical weapons convention and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons? Isopropyl alcohol and hexamine are required to make sarin gas, but neither of those two components is covered by the chemical weapons convention. Are there plans to address that? Can she tell us a bit more about the US aid initiative she mentioned in her statement and how much new money will go to it?

The UN Security Council is tasked with underpinning global security, and it worries us all that it is now effectively an entirely broken instrument. Although, like the Secretary of State, I hold no candle for the Russian veto, if the veto is dead for Moscow, it is dead for every permanent member of the Security Council. Given that with the airstrikes the UK Government have essentially acted, whether we like it or not, outwith the norms she says the Government have acted to defend, what is the long-term plan to bring back some decorum, some decency and some order to the UN Security Council?

Mr Speaker: It is always in the interest of our proceedings that they should be entirely intelligible to those who attend or who watch on television. If memory serves me correctly, only three people knew the answer to the Schleswig-Holstein question: one died, a second went mad and the third forgot the answer.

Penny Mordaunt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I hope to do rather better in my reply to the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald).

Whether through financial levers or through having other options in our humanitarian toolbox, we need to be able to do more in future. When I was a Defence Minister, I was fed up of coming to the House to say

why we could not do airdrops; as Secretary of State for International Development, I am fed up of coming to the House to say why we cannot protect people better. We are a smart nation. We have great brains in our armed forces and in our civil contingencies, and we work very closely with our US allies. We have to come up with some better capabilities, and I am determined that we will do so.

We also want to focus on financial levers, and we are working with the EU and other international partners to develop them. I cannot give details on that today, but it is in train. I will update the House at a later date.

The US aid initiative is a joint partnership with the UK. Initially, we are each putting in £5 million to invite competition. We are asking people to come in with ideas, and we will then look at and develop those ideas, which could be about protecting civilians, getting power or water supplies back up or getting aid to individual people.

Additionally, we will set up a humanitarian innovation hub in the UK. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East will lead on that, and it will use the best brains from across many sectors to come up with solutions that we can use and that may help our defence and civil contingency capabilities.

On the UN, huge efforts are being made by our dedicated team in New York. I have spent time with them and I have visited them, and they are making a sterling effort. We need to keep pressure on Russia and Iran, which is the only way we will get things back to how we want them to work. In the meantime, we have to find other ways of making sure that we adhere to international norms. We will all be safer if that is the case.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Is any expenditure from the conflict, stability and security fund planned for Idlib province? If so, what are the objectives of that expenditure and how will it be accounted for?

Penny Mordaunt: Expenditure from that fund has already been put into Idlib in particular. I am looking to do more with DFID's funding in Idlib and in other areas that are next in the firing line. We still have some access to four such areas, and I can write to let my hon. Friend know exactly what expenditure has come out of the CSSF.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I associate myself with her comments about South Sudan, and I put on the record my deep concern about today's situation in Kabul, where we have seen significant loss of life, including journalists and others.

The Secretary of State talks about the importance of humanitarian access. Given the issues we have seen with Turkey's operations in and around Afrin and Turkey's role in controlling many of the crucial border points around Idlib where, unfortunately, we expect there to be significant military action in the near future, what conversations have she and her ministerial colleagues had with the Turkish Government at the highest levels to ensure that those border posts are open for humanitarian access?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East has spoken to the Turkish Government and to a number of individuals at the UN. We want this situation to de-escalate. It is, at the very least, a distraction in the fight against Daesh, as I reported to the House in the quarterly counter-Daesh update a few weeks ago. We remain concerned, and we will continue our diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the situation.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that, by helping refugees closer to Syria, rather than inviting them here, we can help many, many more people? As those refugees will obviously want, in due course, to return to their country, is there any news on possible progress on a diplomatic solution?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are able to help millions of individuals, and it is not just about providing a safe haven; it is also about providing them with education and skills training to ensure that when they are able to return to their homes—and we hope that will be sooner rather than later—they are equipped to pick up their lives as swiftly as possible.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The last chapter of the history of Syria's destruction has already been written: it is the complete annihilation of Idlib by barrel bombs delivered by Assad's murderous forces, backed up by the equally murderous Russians. What can the UK Government do to try to avoid tens of thousands of additional deaths in Idlib? Will the Government expand the family reunion scheme and increase the number of Syrian refugees who are able to come to the UK, to protect more vulnerable people?

Penny Mordaunt: The right hon. Gentleman is right, in that we think Idlib and some other areas are going to be next hit. We have done a tremendous amount to forward deploy equipment to protect individuals—everything from sandbags to personal protection equipment. He will understand that in some areas access is extremely difficult and there are enormous numbers of people. Our priority is to protect those individuals who can protect others—the civilian defence workers and medics in those areas. Of course, we urge those who are in control of those events, who do not have to bomb their own people, to desist from doing so and to come to the negotiating table.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her appointment as Minister for Women and Equalities, in addition to her current job, and I know she feels passionately about that. An estimated 478 health facilities have either been destroyed or attacked since the conflict began. What is she doing to make sure that vital medical care can be given?

Penny Mordaunt: In addition to the protection for those individuals I have just mentioned, part of our funding will be going to train thousands of medics in advanced trauma care. It is vital that we keep health services running, provide medical consultations and keep pushing for access for medical supplies. I am afraid that my hon. Friend is right to say that hospitals, medical facilities and aid convoys containing medical equipment have been targeted by the regime.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her new responsibilities. May I use this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of St Bernadette's parish in my constituency, which is developing resources to enable it to host a Syrian refugee family? In the context of the debate about the Windrush scandal and a "hostile environment", many people reasonably ask why, following the Dubs amendment in the House of Lords, this country is not fulfilling its moral responsibility to Syrian child refugees. How many Syrian child refugees have we taken and what are her plans for the future?

Penny Mordaunt: On the resettlement of vulnerable individuals, we have taken about half our commitment to date—just over 10,000 individuals. I fully appreciate the hon. Gentleman's urging us to do all we can to ensure people are safe. We have chosen to prioritise those who are extremely vulnerable and in need of a particular health treatment, or those who are vulnerable for some other reason, but we are supporting millions of refugees. We are the major contributor to that, taking care not just of people's basic needs, but of education. I recently visited some of the education facilities in countries in the region, and Britain should be very proud of what we are doing to assist people. I visited a school that is particularly focused on children who have disabilities and have been injured in the shelling in Syria. UK aid is doing great work. We are helping not just a few thousand individuals in the UK but millions in the region.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): In her opening statement, my right hon. Friend referred to the "barbaric attack in Douma on innocent civilians, including young children". Last week, in the margins of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Mr Slutsky, who is Mr Putin's spokesman on earth, whined that the Russians only faced obligations, not rights. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Russian Federation has absolutely no right either to use or promote the use of chemical weapons and that if the Russians want to be accepted in the civilised world, they should join the UK and others in seeking a political solution, rather than exacerbating the suffering?

Penny Mordaunt: I could not agree more. There is a very good reason why these weapons have been outlawed: they cause immense suffering. This regime is choosing not only to bomb its own people, but to exterminate them in the most cruel ways imaginable. Any nation that facilitates that should be ashamed of itself. I do not think the Russian people would approve of that kind of behaviour, and the Russian Government should look to their conscience and to the security of their own people, because by breaking these international norms they are putting their own people in danger, too.

Mr Speaker: I cannot say I have heard of this Slutsky fellow, but I am sure that the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) can take it upon himself to educate the gentleman—very useful.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The statement is welcome, and I hope it will be followed by further regular and frequent updates. The Secretary of State knows that many of us are pushing for far stronger actions than sanctions to deal with the full spectrum of Assad's atrocities, but when she talks about

“A new sanctions regime against those responsible for chemical weapons use”, do we firmly put Iran and Syria among those “responsible”? Will she consider a wider sanctions regime, covering siege, starvation and deliberate targeting of civilians, as well as chemical weapons use?

Penny Mordaunt: Yes, I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. He will understand why we do not want to make announcements until we are ready to act on these matters, but we are looking closely at what we think would be effective and what will deter future action. He is right to say that chemical weapons are against international norms, but barrel bombing children is against international norms, too.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Given that we had an opportunity in 2013 to make a real difference but it was opportunistically rejected, may I say to my right hon. Friend that she should not take any advice from the Labour party? To ask her a specific question, some 500 medical centre and general practice buildings have been destroyed; what is her Department doing—is there anything it can do—to restore medical aid in Syria?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend will know that the most appalling things have happened. Even when co-ordinates have been given over with a view to ensuring that strikes avoid medical centres, they have been used to attack those sites. We saw the report of the surgeon David Nott, who was conducting an operation on an injured Syrian child down the line from London and who found that the signal he was using to perform that operation was used to target a hospital. This is why we have launched these new challenges, calling on people who have expertise, technical know-how and great ideas to enable us to be ahead of individuals who choose to unleash this barbaric behaviour on their own people. We want to do better. We want to have more options in the future to protect people.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, members of the Foreign Affairs Committee were in New York for discussions with the United Nations Secretary-General, members of the Security Council and other UN member states. It is clear that far from ignoring the UN, our ambassador Karen Pierce and her colleagues are making prodigious efforts to get progress on Syria. The Secretary of State referred to the 12 Russian vetoes. Given that there will continue to be Russian vetoes, what are we going to do when Assad carries out mass murder of civilians in Idlib? Are we going to walk by on the other side or will we have another effort, with our coalition partners, France and the United States and others, to stop these atrocities?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that one reason why we took action against the use of chemical weapons a few weeks ago—as well as to degrade Assad’s capability—was to deter that kind of action in future. The hon. Gentleman’s support and strong stance on humanitarian issues have strengthened that message. The fact that Members from all parties have condemned not only the chemical weapons attacks but the use of conventional weapons against civilians, and have expressed our resolve that those things should not happen, will have helped that message. The hon. Gentleman will understand why I cannot talk today about specific future action that we or our allies might take, but Assad and his backers should be under no illusions: we will not tolerate such breaches of international norms.

David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and congratulate her on her new ministerial responsibilities. What assessment has she made of the recent levels of religious persecution in Syria? What steps is she taking to ensure that persecuted religious minorities have access to humanitarian aid?

Penny Mordaunt: That is an important issue. In the new development offer that I unveiled a couple of weeks ago, I included new programming specifically in respect of the protection of civilians being persecuted for their religious beliefs. A great deal of protection can be afforded to people who are being persecuted—whether it is for their religious beliefs or they are women and children, who are particularly vulnerable—by having good reporting mechanisms in the way we deliver aid. If the recipients of aid know who to go to when, for example, aid is being withheld, we will be able to stop these things much quicker, so we are looking into that.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I supported the action against the use of chemical weapons the other week, and I consider any failure to take action to be appeasement in the face of the atrocities committed by the Assad regime and the increasing levels of aggression from the Russian state. My question relates to the White Helmets, who have played a significant part in saving tens of thousands of lives in Syria. What support will the Government continue to give to the White Helmets, and in what form?

Penny Mordaunt: First, I thank the hon. Lady for the stance that she took. The sentiments I expressed in my response to the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) also apply to her and to many other Opposition Members. The White Helmets have done a phenomenal job, and I very much regret some of the false propaganda that has been put around about their work. We are supplying them with financial assistance, and as I said, we are looking to forward deploy as much protective equipment as we can. It is people like that, along with medical teams, who we really need to ensure are protected in the four areas that I think will be targeted next.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to Syria’s neighbours that have taken in refugees? Will she set out what support she is offering to those countries to undertake what must be an enormous humanitarian task?

Penny Mordaunt: In addition to the aid that we are supplying and, as I mentioned, the other things we are trying to do to help those countries with the costs that they are having to bear, we need to help them in other ways. That is why we have announced the conference with Jordan—an amazing country with a huge amount to offer. We want to help Jordan to grow its economy, as well as to enable it to continue the tremendous generosity and hospitality that it is showing to refugees.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for highlighting so very well the suffering of millions of Syrians. The Syrian Christian population is estimated by Open Doors to have halved since 2011, down from 2 million to 1 million, and the number of displaced in Syria stands at 6.7 million. Will the Secretary of State confirm that DFID aid has

[*Jim Shannon*]

been delivered to where the Christian minorities are now located? Has it reached large numbers of the displaced?

Penny Mordaunt: As I have said, we are completely reliant on what access we can get to certain areas. We cannot get aid convoys into some areas into which we wish to get them. I assure the hon. Gentleman that in the mechanisms and partners with which we work to deliver aid on the ground, we are very conscious of these issues and we are strengthening those systems all the time. I have met individuals who are particularly concerned about protecting those who may be being persecuted for their religious beliefs. As I said, I am announcing some new programming to give us more options on that front.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Last week, like my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), I was at the Council of Europe, where I spoke about Jordan's effort to educate so many Syrian refugees. What is the Secretary of State going to do to help with the crisis in early years education in that country?

Penny Mordaunt: We are doing a range of things. As a general principle, I am keen that, whether in respect of humanitarian or more traditional forms of economic development, we join up the different programmes that we run—that we join up our maternal health provision with our early years provision and our education provision—and that we build systems as we go. There are many things that we can do to strengthen the healthcare and education systems of those countries in the region that are hosting refugees. I hope that one day we will be able to make similar contributions and give similar technical advice to Syria.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): As a Government, we should resettle the people who are most vulnerable and those with the most complex needs, but the fact is that to go beyond that risks diverting resources from literally thousands of individuals and driving people towards the human traffickers and the perilous journey across the Mediterranean. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the strategy to support those in the region will allow Syrian refugees to go home safely when it is safe for them to do so?

Penny Mordaunt: Yes, and my hon. Friend enables me to make a further point, which is that many of the refugees who are resident in these host countries are not there passively receiving aid, but are actively contributing to those societies. They are running businesses and engaging in economic activity. We need to ensure that people who have been there for many years and may remain for some time have the best possible future. It is right that we in the UK take in those who need additional protections and additional care and support.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The Syrian civil war is obviously controversial, as is the UK's international aid budget. What more can the Department do to promote the good aid work that the UK is doing in respect of the Syrian conflict? As the Secretary of State mentioned, we are the second largest bilateral donor, after the United States.

Penny Mordaunt: The public are actually very supportive of humanitarian relief; it is something that they support uncontroversially. I know that because I see how much they give voluntarily through Disasters Emergency Committee appeals and so forth. We have to give the public greater confidence in what we do with their money. It is not that people are ungenerous or that they do not believe that the UK has an actual interest in building trading partners for the future; they are just a bit suspicious about how we have been going about it. That is why a couple of weeks ago I set out a new development offer that not only delivers the global goals better, but explicitly explains why that is in the UK's interests.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What progress has been made on working with smaller partners in Syria, such as the very brave medics supported by the Hands Up Foundation who are working in Idlib at this very minute? Will the Secretary of State join me in reminding Government and Opposition Members that Singing for Syrians is not just for Christmas and that the money donated now can go straight to Idlib?

Penny Mordaunt: May I first pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all that she and other colleagues have done through this amazing organisation? I know how keenly she feels the plight of those on the ground when there has been an attack in an area in which some of her team are working. The Department has made good progress with the launch of the small charities scheme, but I would like us to go further. Other Members have mentioned organisations in their own constituencies. We have tremendous organisations up and down the country that contribute a huge amount not just in financial support and aid, but in friendship to those in the developing world.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the statement by the Secretary of State, not least what she said about the work that we are doing with our allies given the way that, on the one hand, Russia and its apologists across the world have been saying that we should respect the UN, while, on the other, making sure that the UN cannot do anything effective. Can she reassure me and tell me how, in the long term, we can bring to justice some of these people who have committed such appalling crimes, given that Russia is likely to continue to veto any reference to the International Criminal Court?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. One of the sessions that I took part in at the Brussels conference was with civil society and we looked at how we will collect evidence and hold people to account for their actions. Some of our funding will support an international initiative to do just that, and it is vital that we do so. We should do everything in our power to stop the sorts of things that we have seen over the past eight years happening ever again.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): With respect to promoting our aid effort, as raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), is my right hon. Friend aware of anyone who spends 99.3% of their income on themselves?

Penny Mordaunt: I can see that I will have to deploy my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) to make the case for what we do. We do sometimes

focus on that number of 0.7%, but we should actually focus on what that money does. If we can explain this better to the British public, who enable us to help people such as Syria's children, they would be very proud of what the funding does.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on her appointment as the Women and Equalities Minister. Does she agree that protecting women and girls in Syria and in the region should be a priority, and will she set out her Department's specific action in that regard?

Penny Mordaunt: The needs of women and girls are at the heart of our approach to humanitarian efforts. We have enshrined that in a tri-departmental policy with the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence. It is vital, particularly in conflict and protracted crises, that we ensure that women and girls are shaping our humanitarian effort and that their needs are absolutely at the centre of what we do, which means that they are at the heart of our doctrine.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with Haian Dukhan, a PhD student at the University of St Andrews, who left Syria in 2012 because of the two evils of President Assad and Daesh and who described our action in Syria as "necessary and legitimate" because Assad had crossed a red line? Does she share my view that our response to the crisis in Syria also confirms that our aid budget is in our strategic national interest?

Penny Mordaunt: Clearly, we are involved in a lot of economic development to produce the trading partners for the UK of the future, but what we do on the humanitarian front is the hallmark of a great nation, and we should be very proud of that. I know that the British public are very proud of our humanitarian work.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I recently met the Reverend Dr Grant Barclay of Orchardhill Parish Church in Giffnock and he said that many of his congregation have felt deeply affected by the humanitarian situation in Syria and want to help. How best can church and indeed community groups support the work that the Secretary of State and her Department are doing in response to this conflict?

Penny Mordaunt: There are many ways that they can help. Clearly, many community groups raise funds and give aid directly. There is also a lot we can do to show our support, particularly when groups such as the White Helmets are under attack. We can ensure that the truth is out there; we can confront people who decide to peddle falsehoods about what is actually happening on the ground; and we can show our support. Ultimately, though, it is the practical needs that we must address. I hope that, if we can develop the small charities scheme, groups such as my hon. Friend mentioned will be able to benefit from UK aid money.

Point of Order

6.25 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions last Thursday, I asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food why the Government will not support my Food Insecurity Bill. He said that the Food Standards Agency food survey asked exactly the questions proposed in my Bill and that we also have an annual living costs and food survey. The Minister knows, as I outlined in a letter I wrote to him on 4 April, that the Food Standards Agency survey does not exactly include the questions proposed. He also knows that the annual living costs and food survey contains no questions relating to food insecurity or hunger and simply focuses on the expenditure of households on food. I wonder whether, through your good offices, Madam Deputy Speaker, you can compel the Minister to come to the House and correct the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for advance notice of it. As Mr Speaker reminded the House only last week, Members are responsible for the accuracy of their statements, and it is up to them if they wish to make any corrections to them. I cannot compel the Minister to do that, but she has very successfully put her point on the record.

DOMESTIC GAS AND ELECTRICITY (TARIFF CAP) BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 6 March 2018 (Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill: Programme) be varied as follows:

(1) Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.

(2) 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 on the motion for this Order.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this Order.—
(*Claire Perry.*)

Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

ONGOING RELATIVE TARIFF DIFFERENTIAL

“(1) The Secretary of State may, during the term of the tariff cap conditions being in place, develop, ready for implementation, a relative tariff differential.

(2) A relative tariff differential is a requirement on supply licence holders that the difference between the cheapest advertised rate and the most expensive standard variable or default rate shall be no more than a specified proportion of the cheapest advertised rate.

(3) The Authority will be responsible for setting the proportion referred to in subsection (2).

(4) The relative tariff differential shall take effect on the termination of the tariff cap conditions.” —(Dr Whitehead.)

This new clause would allow the Secretary of State to develop requirements in relation to a differential between the cheapest and most expensive rates offered by suppliers, to be put into effect after the termination of the tariff cap.

Brought up, and read the First time.

6.27 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 5, in clause 1, page 1, line 3, leave out “after this Act is” and insert

“, and within five months of this Act being”.

This amendment would require the Authority to insert the standard supply licence conditions within five months of Royal Assent.

Amendment 2, page 1, line 9, at end insert—

“(1A) A cap imposed by tariff cap conditions shall be calculated so as to require that the difference between the cheapest advertised tariff and the most expensive standard variable or default tariff offered by a holder of a supply licence is no more than a specified proportion of the cheapest advertised tariff.

(1B) The proportion under subsection (1A) shall be specified by the tariff cap conditions.”

This amendment would require the tariff cap to be calculated with reference to the difference between supplier's cheapest tariff and most expensive variable or default rate.

Amendment 3, page 1, line 24, at end insert—

“(c) “cheapest advertised rate” means the lowest rate or amount charged for, or in relation to, the supply of gas or electricity under any contract available to the customer.”

This amendment is consequential to Amendment 2 and provides a definition of “cheapest advertised rate”.

Amendment 4, page 2, line 15, at end insert—

“(e) the ability of the Authority to accurately forecast and model wholesale energy prices, and the need to minimise the impact of inaccuracies on domestic customers and holders of supply licences in the future.

(f) the difference between the cheapest advertised rate and the most expensive standard variable or default rate offered by a holder of a supply licence.”

This amendment would extend the matters Ofgem is required to consider when setting the tariff cap to include the matters listed in the amendment.

Amendment 6, page 2, line 15, at end insert—

“(e) the need to ensure that customers on standard variable and default rates have their annual expenditure on gas and electricity reduced by no less than £100 as a result of the tariff cap conditions”

This amendment would require the Authority to ensure that the tariff cap conditions result in customers on standard variable and default rates having their annual expenditure reduced by no less than £100.

Amendment 7, page 2, line 15, at end insert—

“(e) the need to ensure that adequate protection exists for vulnerable domestic customers, including ensuring those customers who currently benefit under a cap imposed by the Authority on rates or amounts charged for, or in relation to, the supply of gas or electricity because they appear to the Authority to be vulnerable, retain those benefits.”

This amendment would require the Authority to have regard to the protection of vulnerable customers, including ensuring those who currently benefit under a safeguard tariff continue to do so.

Amendment 9, page 2, line 15, at end insert—

“(e) the need to ensure that adequate protection exists for—

- (i) customers who benefit from a cap imposed by the Authority on rates or amounts charged for, or in relation to, the supply of gas or electricity on the basis that they appear to the Authority to be vulnerable;
- (ii) in circumstances where a cap described in sub-paragraph (i) has been withdrawn, customers who would have benefited from such a cap had it still been in force; and
- (iii) other vulnerable domestic customers.”

This amendment would ensure that when exercising its functions under this section, the Authority must have regard to protection for vulnerable customers, including those who are protected or (in circumstances where it is no longer in force) would have been protected by a safeguard tariff.

Amendment 8, in clause 7, page 4, line 39, leave out from “must” to end of line 40 and insert “have regard to the extent to which—

- (a) progress has been made in installing smart meters for use by domestic customers,
- (b) incentives for holders of energy supply licences to improve their efficiency have been created,
- (c) holders of energy supply licences are able to compete effectively for domestic supply contracts,
- (d) incentives for domestic customers to switch to different supply contracts are in place,
- (e) the barriers which prevent the customers from switching from different supply contracts quickly and easily are addressed,
- (f) holders of supply licences who operate efficiently are able to finance activities authorised by the licence,
- (g) holders of supply licences have eliminated practices that are to the detriment of customers in their tariff structures,
- (h) District Network Operator costs and dividends are proportionate to expectations and the impact of that on domestic supply contracts, and
- (i) vulnerable and disabled customers are adequately protected.”

This amendment sets out additional matters that the Authority must have regard to when conducting a review of competition for domestic supply contracts.

Amendment 1, page 4, line 39, leave out from “which” to the end of line 40 and insert “—

- (a) progress has been made in installing smart meters for use by domestic customers; and

- (b) holders of supply licences are using available data, whether collected through smart meters or through other means, to—
 - (i) assess the energy consumption patterns of domestic customers; and
 - (ii) use such data to identify, and move domestic customers onto, the most competitive tariff.”

This amendment requires Ofgem to consider the progress made by energy companies in offering domestic customers the cheapest available rate based on their individual consumption patterns when determining whether there is an effective market.

Dr Whitehead: We support the Government’s aim to introduce a temporary absolute price cap as set out in the Bill. We claim some intellectual property rights in this, in that Labour proposed a temporary price cap before the 2015 election, which was famously denounced by the then Prime Minister as

“wanting to live in some sort of Marxist universe.”

It is good to see that the Government have not flinched at the possibility of the apparition of its former leader returning to denounce this price cap in the same terms, but then we live in interesting times.

It is necessary to introduce an absolute cap, not a relative price cap, as soon as possible and for a limited period beginning no later than this winter. We have noted the continuing anomalies in the market, the continuing opportunities to game the market, and indeed, the report by the Competition and Markets Authority that customers were being overcharged by £1.2 billion over the recent period as a result of those anomalies. Therefore, a price cap and a pause in price increases, other than those agreed by Ofgem and relating to wholesale price movements, is the right thing to do now, providing, as we have always said and as we said when we introduced the idea of a price cap previously, that action is taken to correct those anomalies during the period of the cap, so that the market resumes at the end of it under circumstances that do not just result in prices running away again and our all being here a little further down the road, finding that nothing has changed and that perhaps a further cap is necessary.

We want to ensure that the Bill does just that—that the terms under which Ofgem operates the price cap give due attention to the current market problems; that the basis on which the cap is ended is clear in the legislation; and that, subsequent to the cap ending, there are measures in place to ensure that some of the more egregious problems of the present market arrangements are not repeated in the future. That is the basis on which we are judging the Bill and on which we are suggesting amendments, as we did in Committee. We do not want to overthrow or weaken the Bill, and we understand that it needs to be robust against possible challenges. Our amendments would therefore have the sole effect of strengthening the Bill and its purpose, and they would ensure that its architecture fully reflects that purpose.

6.30 pm

I will talk briefly to our amendments in the order in which they would sit in the text of the Bill. I hope that this will demonstrate to hon. Members that there is a narrative behind them that is about putting further steel into the Bill and clarifying its purpose during and after the period of the price cap as set out in the Bill.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I draw to my hon. Friend’s attention the comments of Miss Burdett from Rayners Lane in my constituency, who notes that online rates for energy bills are often cheaper than the standard rate, potentially leaving elderly and vulnerable people who cannot go online for whatever reason at a significant disadvantage compared with the rest of us. Would my hon. Friend’s amendments help people such as Miss Burdett, in the situation that I have described?

Dr Whitehead: I thank my hon. Friend for that important observation about what one might describe as one of the current market anomalies. It is not just about the differentials between the different ways that one can secure a tariff; it is about the issue of prepaid metering and the differential between the bills of people who are in fuel poverty or are vulnerable in other ways and the bills of those who have more resources. Indeed, some of the amendments that we have tabled—and one in particular—would secure firmly in the Bill matters that Ofgem and the Minister would be required to take into account when considering the introduction of the price cap and the period after which it ends.

Amendment 5 would start the process of strengthening the Bill by ensuring that the cap takes effect within no more than a known period that is stated in the Bill. That is because we want the cap in place for this winter. We know that the equivocation on the cap has lost valuable time. The Government introduced it as a manifesto item before the last election, but then apparently went cool on the idea, before suggesting that it was the administrative responsibility of Ofgem. Only then, after a pause of a number of months, was it actually introduced as legislation, and we are now rushing to get the Bill on the statute books so that the cap can be in place this winter.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The shadow Minister has brought forward his definition of winter from 30 November in Committee to something that is hopefully a bit sooner. Does he still not agree, as we discussed in Committee, that setting a date for the Bill to be implemented may mean that we rush Ofgem in a way that may not prove to be helpful? Indeed, if Ofgem exceeds our expectations and gets this done quicker, we may be giving the energy companies a target by which to raise their prices. It might be better to let Ofgem go away and prepare the cap as quickly as possible, and act as soon as possible thereafter.

Dr Whitehead: Indeed, the hon. Gentleman has a point, which is why now—on Report—the amendment would put a maximum number of months, not a specific date, in the Bill. One might say that hon. Members listened to each other in Committee regarding possible future amendments, which is why I tabled amendment 5 in this manner. However, the fundamental point of the amendment is still to get the Bill working, so that the cap is in place before the winter. Ofgem has said that it thinks it can have a cap up and running in five months, as we have suggested in the amendment. We therefore want the maximum timeframe of five months to be reflected in the Bill, so that the cap is guaranteed at around the time when people get their winter fuel allowance, not when winter returns, as it seems to do these days, in the middle of next spring.

Amendment 6 seeks to quantify the saving that customers might expect as a result of the cap, but we do not wish to make up a figure in so doing. We want to take the

[Dr Whitehead]

Prime Minister's word on this, when she specified that customers would save £100 as a result of the price cap that her Government were about to introduce. To be precise, *The Sun* of 27 February this year had the splendid headline "Millions of Brits in line for £100 as Theresa May delivers on energy price cap promise". This was just one of a number of sources reporting the Prime Minister's price save promise, but *The Sun* went further, stating:

"Government insiders say the cap should save at least £100, potentially rising to £300 a year with increased competition and faster switching."

Now, I do not know whether there are any Government insiders in the Chamber—or, indeed, whether the Minister is one of those cited—but we can assure them that we will take the conservative route on this occasion and propose only that the Bill will do what the Prime Minister says it will.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I am slightly perturbed that the hon. Gentleman is quoting *The Sun* as the authority by which we make legislation in this House.

Dr Whitehead: On reflection, I can join the hon. Gentleman in being slightly perturbed that I am quoting *The Sun* in this context. I assure him that although I quoted *The Sun*, a range of authorities from the *Daily Mail*—getting better?—up to the BBC's website suggested that the Prime Minister did actually say that people would save £100. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that quoting *The Sun* was not entirely appropriate under all the other circumstances, I can do nothing other than agree with him.

Amendment 7 would ensure that vulnerable customers, including those already protected by a tariff cap, do not lose that protection as a result of the overall cap being introduced.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): If we put together the hon. Gentleman's remarks about amendments 5 and 6—the general gist of which I have no quarrel with—and if Ofgem were subject to legal challenge as a result of trying to impose a cap of this size on that timetable, what does he suggest would be the effect of his amendments if they had entered law? How would Ofgem deal with the conflict between the courts and an Act of Parliament?

Dr Whitehead: My understanding is that the question of a timeframe for implementation of the cap would be strengthened considerably regarding a potential legal challenge by providing for a maximum period for the introduction of the cap, rather than a specified date. I think that we accept the principle that there should be some indication in the Bill of when the cap is to arise; certainly, in previous discussions of the Bill, there has been a real concern about the body responsible for implementing a cap after the legislation has been passed through the House taking any or no specified period to prepare the cap for its actual execution. The preparation of the cap will also be part of the process by which it is strengthened against legal challenge. That therefore needs to be done carefully and properly so that it is implemented in a way that is proofed against such legal challenges. Ofgem indicated in its evidence to the Committee the period that it thought reasonable for it to be required to

take forward the implementation of the cap. Placing that period in the Bill therefore seems, at least to the Opposition, to be adding to the proof against legal action rather than detracting from it.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I completely accept that it is advantageous to give Ofgem a push to do this on the timescale that the hon. Gentleman is describing. However, clause 1(1) says that

"the Authority...must modify the standard supply licence conditions", and under his amendments, it would have to have done that by a given date, yet the court may be preventing it from doing so. I still do not understand how he deals with that legal conflict.

Dr Whitehead: The Bill says that what needs to be done to modify licences to bring the cap about, among other things, has to be done by Ofgem as part of its implementation process. The question of legal challenge to Ofgem concerns, at its heart, what Ofgem does over whatever period may be specified to ensure that the implementation of the cap does not deviate from what is set out in legislation. That is the clear basis on which the cap should be undertaken, and that is the responsibility of Ofgem.

The second issue is the time within which Ofgem considers that it can introduce that cap in the way that the right hon. Gentleman has described, given its workload and capacity to do so. Indeed, Ofgem is on the public record, through the evidence that it gave to the Committee—he will know that that has some weight through being a public statement in *Hansard*—as saying that it felt that it could do it within five months. The amendment merely tries to tidy up the process by putting that timeframe into the Bill, while not in any way detracting from the strength or otherwise of what Ofgem is required to do in acting to implement the cap in a way that is both effective and legally watertight.

I am not sure that I can go too much further with the right hon. Gentleman's point. I am happy to take it up with him separately if he wishes. However, I have explained where we are in seeking a combination of watertightness in the Bill and clarity that the wishes of this House can be undertaken in through the price cap coming in during the period when it is supposed to come in.

Amendment 7 relates to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) about vulnerable customers and people who are not in a position to take advantage of all the devices that other, less vulnerable customers would be able to take advantage of—that is, customers protected by the existing tariff cap in particular. In our view, it is important that those who are protected by the tariff cap do not lose that protection as a result of the overall cap being introduced. It would be helpful if the Minister, even if she is not minded to accept the amendment, put it beyond doubt that that is the Government's intention and that they will not seek to lose the current safeguard tariff as the overall tariff cap comes in.

James Heappey: Clearly amendments 7 and 9 both have real merit in getting the protection of vulnerable customers right, which is important, but why does the hon. Gentleman feel that his amendment is better than amendment 9?

6.45 pm

Dr Whitehead: I am afraid that I cannot give the hon. Gentleman that assessment, because I think that both have equal merit in dealing with very similar issues.

James Heapey: In a slightly different way.

Dr Whitehead: Indeed, but both have equal merit, and I would not want to distinguish between them in what they would add to the Bill. They both have the central concern that vulnerable customers should not be treated adversely as a result of the overall tariff cap coming in. That is the point that I wish to pay attention to. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) will also want to do so when she speaks to amendment 9.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Without wanting to enter into a beauty contest regarding whose amendment is best, will not my amendment 1 be quite consistent with what the Government wish to achieve, which is to require Ofsted—I mean Ofcom—[HON. MEMBERS: “Ofgem.”] Yes, Ofgem—or Ofcap, perhaps. The Government wish to require Ofgem to write to companies to ensure that those who are poorest and least likely to change have been offered the best deal by their provider. I promise that by the time I speak to my amendment, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will know which regulatory body it is.

Dr Whitehead: Yes, there is certainly merit in that idea. It is true that some of the amendments take some of the specific actions that may be taken a little further than is suggested in amendment 7. However, whichever of the amendments one wishes to pin the first-place rosette on to, the key point is that vulnerable customers need to have proper protection as the tariff cap comes forward.

It is in the Government’s interests, I think, to clarify exactly what they intend the Bill to do regarding that protection. That can easily be done by the Minister clearly stating today, as I hope she will, that vulnerable customers will not lose the current safeguard tariff as the overall tariff cap comes in. Indeed, if the overall price cap consumes the safeguard tariff, vulnerable customers could see their prices could go up by more than £30 as a result of the difference between the safeguard and the absolute tariff. That would, as I am sure she will agree, be a perverse outcome that she would be anxious to disavow.

The Minister will have to clarify for us that the Bill means that Ofgem can bring forward the extended safeguard tariff at the same time as the standard variable tariff cap; that the extended safeguard tariff can continue after the absolute cap has ended; and that she will bring forward the necessary secondary legislation before the summer to enable the data sharing needed to extend the safeguard tariff. I am sure that she will be able to reassure us on these points. I look forward to what she has to say about all the amendments before us.

Amendment 8 seeks to introduce to the Bill the symmetry in architecture that appears to be missing from what Ofgem must consider in introducing the cap. As hon. Members can see, the Bill lists a number of matters to which Ofgem should have regard in setting the cap, which relate to

“protecting existing and future domestic customers who pay standard variable and default rates”.

However, when we cast our eyes forward in the Bill, we see that those conditions are wholly absent from the matters that Often is required to consider when it reports to Government on whether circumstances exist that allow the cap to be terminated, as it is required to do by clauses 7 and 8.

Indeed, there is no guidance in the Bill at all on what Ofgem will have to take into account, except, alarmingly, for one consideration: the extent to which progress has been made in installing smart meters, a provision that, if taken too literally, might mean that the cap will be with us until the end of 2023. Our amendment essentially seeks to place in the outbox—the point at which Ofgem reviews the expiry of the cap—the same considerations that it is required to pay attention to in its inbox when it sets the cap.

Finally, we seek in new clause 1 to start the process of introducing what needs to be in place to ensure that the market works well for customers and does not recreate the anomalies that have led us to where we are today. I have no doubt that there will be a number of such provisions, but in our view one of them should be that the arrangement of tariffs by energy companies should not continue as it is.

That is also the substance of amendment 2, tabled by the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), whom I salute for his unflagging work in bringing the idea of a price cap to this point. He introduces in his amendment the suggestion that tariffs should have a piece of elastic on them for each company, to prevent companies from introducing customers to apparently low tariffs initially, only to place them on much higher tariffs when the first offer expires and relying on their loyalty to gain a lot of profit and cause an unfair outcome for customers. That is essentially the instrument that his amendment would introduce, but it is cast as a relative price cap. We do not think it is a satisfactory mechanism for a price cap, but he will no doubt argue his corner. The relative nature of a tariff range restriction means that it can be introduced at any price and is not therefore a cap as such. It is, however, a vital means of keeping prices and fair dealings with customers on a steady trajectory.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee heard an overwhelming amount of evidence opposed to a relative price cap. Can the hon. Gentleman explain why he rejects that evidence and has tabled this new clause?

Dr Whitehead: The hon. Lady is, I think, under the impression that the new clause seeks to introduce a relative price cap. It does not seek to do that at all, or indeed during the period when an absolute price cap is in place. When the absolute price cap has come to an end, which could happen on various dates, there should be a mechanism in place to ensure that tariff differentiation is within certain bounds—I mentioned having a piece of elastic on tariffs—so that companies cannot return to the practice that unfortunately exists today whereby they can take people on board on one particular tariff, and even introduce a discount tariff for a certain period to entice people on to it, and then place people on one of their highest tariffs when that one comes to an end. It is a long piece of elastic in that case. That disadvantages the customer and is not what they thought would happen when they first went on to that tariff, and it seems thoroughly laudable to prevent that.

[Dr Whitehead]

We need to ensure that market mechanisms are in place to prevent us from returning to where we are at present and to the situation that got us into this position in the first place. We believe that the mechanism for a relative tariff differential has a different function entirely from the relative price cap being suggested in some quarters. I think we would all agree that a relative tariff differential is not a price cap in its own right, as the Select Committee concluded strongly, but a strong mechanism for ensuring that the market works better in future.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): One concern about a relative cap is that there could be a bit of floor-raising, with some of the cheaper tariffs disappearing. Although there might not be a cap in future, what is to stop the same thing happening with a relative tariff system, where we lose the bottom tariffs in the market?

Dr Whitehead: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the possibility that within a relative tariff range arrangement, a company could put forward a very high tariff as a starting point and then put customers on an even higher tariff subsequently, if that tariff is within the piece of elastic keeping the tariffs within reach of each other. If an energy company were to do that outside a price cap, it would be a sure way of losing a large number of customers, because it would have put its initial tariff way above that of any competitors. If it was agreed that market circumstances were such that those sorts of arrangements should be able to return, companies would have to be kamikaze-inclined to pursue that way of doing things.

Alan Brown: I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but is that not why we are introducing an energy tariff Bill in the first place—because people have been on standard variable tariffs that are too expensive, but they are not moving? It is the same with a relative tariff differential; people will not necessarily move, and that is what we really need to sort out in the market.

Dr Whitehead: We have to bear in mind that people will be introduced to a new tariff. Indeed, we hope that by the time the market returns, the issue of people remaining on SVTs for years and not switching will be a thing of the past and there will not be SVTs in the system, but also that there will be other tariff arrangements that effectively prevent SVTs from playing the role they have played before.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): In amendment 6, the hon. Gentleman is trying to ensure that people get money off, which we would all like to see, but would it not be necessary to include some kind of rider so that it applies only if people are burning the same amount of energy year after year? If we went from a warm winter to a very cold one, presumably he would not think we could guarantee the same amount.

Dr Whitehead: Amendment 6, as I recall, would simply place the Prime Minister's words into legislation. It was estimated that a saving of at least £100 would result from the measures, and one aim of the legislation was to bring that saving about. It does not mean that the amount would be exactly £100—indeed, had the

Prime Minister not reported that to *The Sun*, we might have got a rather more complex version of that price promise. We are merely reflecting what was heard on that occasion, and I hope the right hon. Gentleman will take the amendment in the spirit in which it is intended.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I just want to be clear, because I have got very confused about these propositions on a relative cap. On the face of it, the words of new clause 1 are strikingly similar to those of amendment 2. Is the hon. Gentleman proposing that after the absolute cap, there should be a relative cap?

Dr Whitehead: It can be interpreted in that way. We are fully in accord with the Government's idea of an absolute cap, as opposed to the relative cap proposed in the amendments. We suggest that what has been characterised as a relative price cap plays an entirely different function, which is to narrow the gap between tariffs after an absolute price cap has been in place so that companies cannot game the market by switching tariffs in the way I have described. That is nothing to do, at that point, with a price cap; it is about tariff stability over a period and, indeed, an assurance for customers that they are not going to be ripped off as a result of entering on a particular tariff and subsequently being placed on a very high tariff once that initial tariff has come to an end.

7 pm

We hope that the Government will see the wisdom of and accept the new clause and all the amendments, but if the Minister does not set out a satisfactory explanation of why they cannot agree to new clause 1, we may have to test that principle by means of a Division. Overall we wish the Bill well, as we have shown in our positive stance towards it in our debates so far. We trust that the Government will, in taking on board our assurances about the positive nature of these amendments, produce from this House an amended Bill that will be strengthened by the full support we all give it as it moves to the other place for consideration.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I rise to speak to amendments 2 to 4, which stand in my name and those of a variety of Conservative colleagues, including two members of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee as well as former Ministers and Cabinet Ministers.

I should pause to say that I am not arguing against the Bill overall—I spoke and voted in favour of it in principle on Second Reading—and I hope that everyone involved in the campaign I have headed in this area for the past year and a half appreciates that I believe an energy price cap is much needed. I pay tribute to the 214 cross-party MPs who signed up to the idea, plus the Prime Minister and the Minister, who have all been vital in getting us to this point today.

My concern is about not the principles but the detail—the type of price cap envisaged under the Bill—because, to put it bluntly, a fair number of free market Tories are pretty concerned that we are choosing the most anti-competitive, complicated, bureaucratic and inflexible cap on offer. It is inflexible because the Bill specifies an absolute cap that will be set by an all-knowing committee of Ofgem regulators every few months. However, the international price of energy moves around every day,

and it is impossible to know what the price will be in the next six minutes, let alone six months, so the cap price will be out of date in moments and will stay out of date until it is reset again months later. That means it will not protect customers in the way we all want and, because it will be officially blessed by Ofgem, it will embed and legitimise high prices. It is not just me who is worried. Which? says it is

“not certain that customers on a capped default tariff will benefit as market conditions change in future”.

The proposed cap is also complicated—hideously complicated. Why? The assiduous folk at Ofgem have already started publishing details of how they might go ahead and they are warming to their task. It would not be just a single cap, they say; it would be 42 different ones to cover gas and electricity, different meter types and different parts of the country. There would be more than 42 different caps, however, because each one may be split into several different versions depending on whether people pay by direct debit or in some other way, and each will have a fixed standing charge and a variable element—oh, and there is headroom, too. Each of those three items can be calculated in a marvellously technical and complicated variety of ways. For example, the variable element could use a basket of market tariffs, an updated competitive reference price, or a bottom-up cost assessment. Those things might be calculated using a periodical review of realised costs, or third-party data with pre-specified allowances for certain cost items, and so on and—turgidly, complicatedly—on.

Sir Oliver Letwin: My hon. Friend and I have had an engaging conversation about this for many months, but given all the things he reports Ofgem as planning, surely that means we will have not a single point tariff that rapidly becomes outdated, but rather a tariff that will respond—for example, to input costs?

John Penrose: As my right hon. Friend says, he and I have had many conversations about this over many months. I can only say to him that if his argument is that Ofgem might come up with a version of an absolute cap that is a bit less absolute and a bit closer to what I am proposing—in effect, one that caps the gap: a relative cap—I would agree with him that that is a good thing, but if that is the case, as a source of advantage for the cap, why would it not be even better to go the whole hog and have a relative cap in the first place?

John Redwood: Does my hon. Friend think that a relative cap is more likely to deliver a better deal for the customer than an absolute cap?

John Penrose: Yes, absolutely. We heard from the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) what I thought was actually rather a good explanation about why such a cap is so wonderful. The Opposition disagree about the purpose, but the fundamental reason why we are all in the Chamber is that we agree about the injustice in the way the energy market works at the moment, which is that people can start off on one tariff and then get secretly pushed on to a much higher one. It is the clandestine mark-up that riles everybody and really upsets people. By definition, a relative cap would affect what is hacking everybody off, and it would be precisely targeted on dealing with the mischief that is the reason behind the Bill in the first place.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I want to put to my hon. Friend something that has been said by MoneySavingExpert, which is that a relative cap would simply result in firms withdrawing the cheapest deals—the shadow Minister mentioned that—and create the “worst of both worlds”. We do not want to fall into such a trap, as some consumers on expensive tariffs would still be paying more than they need to while many firms would not offer the cheap deals they currently offer.

John Penrose: That argument has been advanced for both a relative cap and for an absolute cap; some people argue that it applies to both. We heard earlier a rather good explanation of why the argument does not really apply, which is that it would be commercial suicide, or a commercial kamikaze effort, for anybody to try to raise their prices in the switching market, which is highly competitive, because they would very rapidly start losing customers hand over fist. I understand that argument, but I do not think it would be relevant in practice.

Stephen Kerr: Just to underline the delicate nature of the balance that we are talking about in terms of caps, the majority view of the Competition and Markets Authority in its report was that a standard variable tariff cap would

“run excessive risks of undermining the competitive process”.

This would be likely to result in worse outcomes for consumers in the long run by

“reducing the incentives of suppliers to compete”

and

“reducing the incentives of customers to engage”,

so a delicate balance needs to be struck.

John Penrose: That is absolutely bang on the money. For goodness’ sake, the Competition and Markets Authority is suggesting such a thing, and that is after all its business.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

John Penrose: I will take one more intervention, but then I must make some progress.

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend is talking about people moving from a competitive rate to the default, which he describes as the standard variable tariff. Does he think that people would be less inclined to put up with the higher rate if it had an alternative name, such as an “emergency tariff”?

John Penrose: There is now a whole range of underlying pro-competitive reforms—I am not normally one to give Ofgem a vast amount of credit, but it really deserves some in this case—that are needed in this market. Renaming the default or standard variable tariff may not have a huge effect, but it might have a positive effect. There is a series of other things, some of which are even more important, that must happen. It is crucial—I agree with the Labour spokesman about this, as I think we all would—that we do not waste our time and that Ofgem continues to reform the market while this temporary price cap is in effect because, when the price cap comes off, we will want the market to have been sufficiently reformed that no further price caps are necessary, because it works like a normal market in which the customer is king. If we have not done that, we will have wasted our time and everybody else’s.

[John Penrose]

I was talking about the complications and the hideous complexity of Ofgem's proposals, but if all that inflexibility and complexity has not put Members off already, they should have a look at the bureaucracy. Pretty much every free market economist will agree that the best way to discover a price is not through a committee that meets every couple of months, but with a genuinely competitive market in which supply and demand are matched from moment to moment all day, every day. Fortunately, we just happen to have one of those handy. The switching market is full of deals on which energy firms compete like mad for business. It is innovative; it has razor-sharp prices; and it takes changes in wholesale energy costs in its stride every day of every week. The customer is, in other words, genuinely king or queen.

That is, as we have just discussed, exactly what we want to see in the rest of the market, so why are we ignoring it? Why go for a far less competitive version that is inflexible, hideously complicated, bureaucratic and committee-based when we could simply tie rip-off default tariffs firmly to the switching market and go down the pub for a drink? The mechanism, as we have heard, would be simplicity itself: a maximum mark-up between each energy firm's best competitive price and its default tariff—we would cap the gap. Unlike with the arrangements in the Bill, there would be just one decision for regulators to take: the size of the gap. Everything else would be taken care of by the link to the competitive switching market.

James Heappey: I am grateful to my hon. Friend—my neighbour—for giving way. Has he given any thought to what a relative cap would do for time-of-use tariffs, the arrival of which we should surely be encouraging? They rely on a big differential from free or negative pricing to the most expensive prices, which disincentivises energy use at peak times. Is he concerned as I am that what he proposes might discourage the arrival of such tariffs?

John Penrose: Much would depend on the size of the cap on the gap proposed by Ofgem, and much would depend on the rest of the pricing structure of the energy firm in question with regard to where it chooses to put its default tariff. Many of these things are, as my hon. Friend points out, yet to arrive. They are starting to be introduced, but they are a relatively new innovation, with small but growing penetration. He is absolutely right that we need to make sure that we do not disincentivise such tariffs. They certainly will not be to everybody's taste, but they may be to the taste of an increasingly large number of people.

I would prefer to start from a simple cap—capping the gap—and then have to make a couple of adjustments, rather than making even more complicated something that is, as I have described, already hideously complicated. If we manage to take care of all the complexity and bureaucracy by establishing a link to the competitive switching market—hey presto!—we will have driven a stake through the heart of the rip-off tariffs. Switching supplier would still be worth while, and there would be far fewer jobs for bureaucrats, lawyers and lobbyists. The customer would be king.

My amendments would make a relative cap either possible or required, depending on which version was chosen. I do not expect or intend to press the amendments

to a Division, but I want everybody to realise that there is a more competitive, more flexible, less bureaucratic, more customer-friendly and generally better alternative, and that at the moment we are not taking it.

It is not just free market Tories such as myself who think that capping the gap is the right way to go. The Labour Front-Bench team, as we have heard, have tabled an amendment that proposes something similar. They might disagree with my description of it, and they have a fancy-schmancy name for it, but, broadly speaking—as my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) pointed out earlier—the wording is very similar and the amendments would effectively do the same thing.

Labour Front Benchers and I disagree over timing, however. The effect of their proposal would be permanent, whereas ours would be temporary while we fixed the underlying anti-competitive problems in the market. There is, none the less, clear cross-party consensus on the principle, at the very least, so why does the Bill ignore this cross-party opportunity? Why are a notionally pro-competition Conservative Government choosing the less competitive, more bureaucratically inflexible and more complicated version instead? Why are we snatching defeat from the jaws of what ought to be a famous free market victory? I look forward to hearing the Minister's answer.

Frank Field: I will not press my amendment to a Division either, but I am very happy to speak to it for 30 seconds. It is designed to request an undertaking from the Minister that she will ask Ofgem to look at the poorest consumers on which it has data and offer them an automatic switch to the lowest rate that suits their expenditure pattern. On that happy note, because I am sure the Minister will give way later, I shall sit down.

7.15 pm

Antoinette Sandbach: I rise to speak in support of amendment 9, which is in the name of the Chair and some of the members of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee; I know that the Chair of the Committee is also going to speak to the amendment. Its purpose is to ensure that there is adequate protection for vulnerable people while the cap is in force and beyond and to probe the Government and the Minister on the matter.

During the prelegislative scrutiny of this Bill in January, the Committee heard evidence from the chief executive of Ofgem. When I asked him about the need to protect vulnerable customers, he conceded that

“there is likely to always be a need to protect customers who would not be fully able to engage even in a...more competitive market.”

What is more, Mr Nolan admitted that Ofgem had “not done as well as we could have”

when it came to its statutory duty to protect vulnerable customers. In fact, he apologised to the Committee for Ofgem's failure to act appropriately to protect vulnerable customers.

The sheer number of people on standard variable tariffs was quite shocking to the Committee, and many of those people will be vulnerable customers. I note that the Minister agreed, saying that

“the regulator also needs to change. It also needs to use the powers it has more effectively.”

That evidence session did not fill me with confidence about Ofgem's effectiveness at protecting vulnerable customers. I believe that the amendment will act as the necessary encouragement to the regulator to do just that. The amendment will also ensure that in the longer term, those who are least able to afford high bills get greater protection. That is because the amendment continues the requirement for due regard beyond the length of a cap.

I want to push the Minister on working with DWP colleagues and others to mitigate the impact of the general data protection regulation. Although the amendment targets the regulator, the Government are well equipped to handle this area. They need to ensure that the required data exchange can take place, so that vulnerable customers can be identified and offered the support that the Government want to make available to them. I am sure that the Government agree with the principle behind the amendment, and I hope that the Minister will address my concerns in full.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) in this debate. I want to speak to amendment 9, which is in my name and those of hon. Members from across the House who are members of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. As the Minister knows, the Committee did a large amount of work on the prelegislative scrutiny of the Bill, and we are all pleased that it has reached Report and Third Reading in time to ensure that the energy price cap is in place for next winter.

During prelegislative scrutiny, the Select Committee proposed several changes, all of which were either accepted by means of amendments to the Bill or accepted in principle. We welcome the collaborative approach of the Minister and her team. Amendment 9 addresses an outstanding concern relating to vulnerable customers that I know the Minister shares. As she knows, 83% of people in social housing, 75% of people on low incomes and 74% of disabled customers are on standard variable tariffs. The aim of the Bill is to ensure not only that everybody has a price cap, but that it will help the most vulnerable, who are predominantly on the standard variable tariffs.

One million vulnerable customers are already on Ofgem's safeguarding tariff. The Select Committee's first recommendation, as part of its prelegislative scrutiny, was for the Government to provide details on plans to protect vulnerable customers from overcharging when Ofgem's safeguarding tariff and the Government's price cap are lifted. My concern, and the concern of other members of the Committee, is what happens when the whole-of-market price cap comes in for standard variable tariffs. Will Ofgem continue with the safeguarding tariff at the same time?

In response to that recommendation, the Government gave a long list of laudable policies that are today in place for vulnerable customers. We of course welcome that list of policies, but concerns linger. Ofgem has been clear, including in a decision letter on 7 December last year, that it plans to do away with the safeguarding tariff when the whole-of-market price cap on standard variable and default tariffs comes in. Ofgem has said that the warm home discount safeguarding tariff will end in December 2019 if it has not already been replaced by other price protection—that is, the price cap we are debating and voting on this evening.

Some might say that that is fine, because the new price cap will replace the safeguarding tariff for customers on the warm home discount. That will only be the case, however, if the new price cap is at the same level or lower than the safeguarding tariff already in existence today. If it is not, then energy bills will rise for the 1 million most vulnerable customers when the price cap comes in. That would mean that the very legislation to protect consumers may hurt those who most need protection, and I know that the Minister, along with Members across the House, does not want that to happen.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend knows very well that in Leeds we have set up White Rose Energy, a municipal energy company. Its main mission is to protect those vulnerable consumers. When consumers move away from the cheapest tariff, it informs them repeatedly to ensure that vulnerable consumers are protected. Is that not a model of good practice for all energy companies?

Rachel Reeves: I am pleased that my hon. Friend and fellow Leeds MP mentions White Rose Energy, which is doing fantastic work. It ensures that customers in Yorkshire have a greater choice of energy companies and genuinely puts customers first. During prelegislative scrutiny, we heard from other small companies, including Bulb and Bristol Energy who are also trying to support their customers.

No one in this House wants a situation where the most vulnerable customers see their prices rise because of the price cap. Perhaps Ofgem could operate the safeguarding tariff and the price cap we are debating today simultaneously. That seems entirely possible and desirable to try to avoid the issues that National Energy Action and others have raised from coming into effect.

I hope we will receive assurances from the Minister this evening that these risks will not be allowed to materialise. In that case, I will not press this amendment to a Division. Let me urge the Minister, however, to ensure that the Bill does its job of protecting customers and that energy companies are not able to use any loopholes that would mean prices rising for the most vulnerable customers: those we have the greatest duty to protect.

Stephen Kerr: It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

There was no shortage of energy—or capping of energy—at yesterday's Stirling Scottish marathon. There was, however, a lot of evidence of determination, particularly as competitors approached the finishing line despite the agonies that some were obviously going through. There was a great deal of grit on display. In addressing amendment 9, it is a lack of grit and determination—almost supine passiveness—that is causing me to have grave concerns about how Ofgem goes about its business.

During prelegislative scrutiny of the Bill, the Select Committee held an evidence session, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) referred earlier. I am sorry to have to say this, but I was unimpressed by the evidence presented in January by Dermot Nolan, the chief executive of Ofgem. He did

[Stephen Kerr]

not come across as a person with an appetite for what I feel needs to be done. He lacked that grit and determination. He admitted to my hon. Friend that, in respect of Ofgem's statutory duty to protect vulnerable customers, "I accept the point that we could and should have done better on vulnerable customers. We have relatively recently put in place principles for vulnerability, which will give a stronger level of protection."

When the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), who is not in his place, challenged Dermot Nolan on what was in effect an admission of failure on his part to fulfil his statutory responsibility towards the protection of those who are vulnerable, he answered:

"We have not done as well as we could have. I fully accept that."

This perturbs me. It perturbed me then and it perturbs me now. The hon. Gentleman, who is an esteemed member of the Select Committee, seemed to me to hit the nail firmly on the head when he said to Dermot Nolan:

"If you do not mind me saying, throughout the testimony here and before, you have been describing what is happening in the market; you are the single most important player in the market, because you have the most extraordinary powers as a regulator, yet your testimony sounds so incredibly passive. Do you ever just roll your sleeves up and get stuck in? I do not really see the evidence of that."

I share the concerns expressed so vividly by the hon. Gentleman.

Since becoming a Member of this House last year and having the privilege of being appointed to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, I have had the opportunity to hear first-hand evidence and testimony from a number of regulators. I have, in all honesty, been underwhelmed by every one of them.

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend is giving an account of the evidence given by Ofgem to the Select Committee. Does he share my concern that the Bill would give that very body the powers to set the energy price cap?

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I share the concerns—I think they are shared across the whole House—about the performance of Ofgem as a regulator. I have broader concerns about the general performance of regulators full stop. Frankly, we seem to have a collection of regulators who either have powers but do not seem to be prepared to use them, or who do not feel they have adequate powers but are not prepared to ask for them. That seems incredible to me. I am very wary of leaving the issue of vulnerable energy customers to the discretion of Ofgem, because I am fearful that the discretion of Ofgem will mean that it will continue, by its own admission, to fail vulnerable customers.

This is an important issue that needs to be aired here and now on Report. Ofgem needs to sit up and take note. It is also important that we hear from the Minister, from the Dispatch Box, what change in the pattern of behaviour we should expect to see from Dermot Nolan and Ofgem. Will they have the determination and grit of the marathon runners in Stirling yesterday? Will they do something with the powers they currently have and the powers they will have when the Bill is passed? Above all,

I want the Government to fulfil the promise of our Prime Minister who, on behalf of the Conservative party, said:

"Our party did not end the unjust and inefficient monopolies of the old nationalised energy corporations only to replace them with a system that traps the poorest customers on the worst deals".

I am fearful that that is what we could do. I look for reassurance from the Minister.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I welcome back to the House this unfinished business. It has been a long-running saga and I have appeared in pretty much every episode for the past six years. I am hoping tonight will be my final appearance on this particular matter, with no repeats to follow.

I welcome the proposed absolute price cap. We have arrived at a place where there is much cross-party agreement, but it comes at a price. That price has been borne by consumers. The Competition and Markets Authority confirmed in 2016 that between 2012 and 2015, the average detriment to the consumer—overcharging, in plain English—was £1.4 billion a year. The CMA found that the scale of overcharging, far from diminishing, was rising, reaching £2 billion a year by 2015.

7.30 pm

In some ways, it is quite surprising that nowhere in this Bill or discussion has there been any mention of recompense. Given that we have all pretty much come to the same conclusion regarding the overcharging of those on standard variable tariffs, it is interesting that we have not discussed the case for compensation, repaid through bills or a windfall tax, on profits that the companies did not deserve and the CMA says they should not have charged. That makes it all the more essential that Ofgem is set a tight timetable to complete its work and set the tariff cap in time for the winter.

I signed the amendment tabled by the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), and I understand the debate we have had in the House so far—that we do not want to create a situation in which, through some judicial review, we could lose the whole essence of the Bill if we did not meet the timespan in five months. However, it is worth having a debate to send a very strong message from the House today that we expect this absolute price cap to be in place in time for next winter. Nothing more and nothing less will be acceptable, because as the Minister knows only too well—I read her comments at the time—between our Bill Committee sittings and our being here today, British Gas/Centrica have already increased their prices for the year ahead by 6%, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who is sitting alongside me, mentions.

We have to make sure that there is no gaming. Ofgem has already gone through a process once in relation to those on prepayment meters and other vulnerable customers, so we know what we are talking about—we have been talking about these issues in one form or another for the last six years. Even though the amendment may not be pushed to a vote, I hope that the Minister will firmly assure us that she expects all hands will be to the pump on this, so that we make sure we get the price cap and give full support to Ofgem to complete the consultation in good time to enable that to happen.

I want to touch on where the cap will apply. Some have questioned whether the cap should apply to those on green tariffs, some of which—let us be honest—are greener than others. Given everything that we know about the energy market and how long it has taken to reach the action in the Bill today, would it not be a nightmare for consumers and all of us if energy companies could find some sort of loophole, using a form of greenwashing and gaming the system, to avoid the cap being applied? That is why I believe that the scope of the tariff cap has to apply to all standard variable tariffs.

The Climate Change Act 2008, which was passed under the last Labour Government, underpins the targets that we have today to tackle emissions and global warming. It was used to encourage a debate and, to incentivise the renewables sector, subsidies were provided through all our Bills. However, the debate across the sector is increasingly focused on becoming subsidy-free, so I question whether green tariffs should automatically be more expensive than other tariffs and whether they should be exempt from the tariff cap.

The theory goes that the more people who sign up to a green energy tariff, the bigger the percentage of green energy in the national supply. As it stands, around 25% of the UK's energy is from renewable green sources, and that is great, but for each of those investments in renewable energy, generators were paid an ongoing subsidy to grow the market and to ensure that that investment was worth while. I have not heard much from large-scale energy producers such as E.ON complaining that their wind farms are a loss-maker, or that they risk bringing down the company because the subsidies are inefficient. Indeed, companies are keen to show how the costs of providing renewable energy are falling. That is confirmed by the Office for Budget Responsibility Green Book: the total subsidy from bill payers to renewable energy was £8.6 billion in 2017-18, and it is set to rise to £13.3 billion by 2022-23. Despite that, the Government have indicated that public subsidy is on a downward trajectory.

The Minister has suggested that it may be right for smaller firms that invest in renewables, such as Good Energy and Ecotricity, to be exempted because they encourage consumers to effectively pay over the odds to invest in new renewable capacity. I respond to that in two ways: first, relatively few customers in these companies are on standard variable tariffs, because these companies' customers tend to be the most savvy and switched-on to switching. Secondly, they claim that their customers are often proactively choosing these companies because of their green offer—so in that case, why not offer a bond or a share in new projects, rather than a crude percentage on their bills to fund company investments? Given the existing subsidies, any supplier making this pitch is really asking consumers to pay twice without any return.

The Bill is not the mechanism to do this, but clauses in it ask Ofgem to look into the matter as part of its consultation. I do not think that it will be easy for Ofgem to draw a nice, neat line between green tariffs offered by one firm and green tariffs offered by one of the big six. The danger is that if we concede the ground to Green Energy and Ecotricity, the big six will come in on the back of that and demand equal treatment. I am sure that they have their brand consultants working right now on new, eco-friendly names to replace their discredited standard variable tariffs.

It is clear to me that we have not come this far to let energy bill payers down again, so let us make sure that as well as the clauses and the amendments, whatever happens to them this evening, we make it very clear through this debate that the Bill will not weaken Ofgem's consultation by allowing companies to create a green-shaped loophole or to claim to be abolishing all SVTs but still place customers on an equally unfair tariff. I hope that the Minister will respond to that in her remarks.

I hope that in most circumstances, good, competitive markets would work in the consumer interest, but energy is not like other products that we buy. It is essential to life. Frankly, ever since privatisation, the energy market has been a managed market. If the companies and their managements were doing what they say they should be doing, we would not be having this debate today. It is sad that it has come to this, but I hope that the fact that it has means that we can draw a line in the sand and that this will be my last appearance on this subject.

James Heappey: It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), with whom I agree on the risk to green tariffs and on making sure that we do not perpetuate the belief that green tariffs are a premium product. We want them to become the universal norm.

Generally, the Bill is a necessary evil. Interference with the market is not our first choice of action, but it is the consequence of a market that has stopped working and is exploiting customers, especially those who are least engaged in it. The Bill's key point is its temporariness. I know that the Minister shares my strong belief that temporary should be as temporary as it absolutely can be. It therefore becomes essential that once the Bill is passed—it is good to see the Opposition's continued support—Ofgem moves very quickly not only to come up with a mechanism for price capping, but to consider what sort of market transformation it can deliver as it changes the regulatory framework in the market, so that we end up with something that is markedly better than what we have now. The big savings come not from a cap that cuts bills by £100 or more, but from the delivery of an energy market that is digitised and cheaper because we have facilitated the disruptive powers of all the new suppliers that are coming in, which in turn will encourage the current large suppliers to change their ways to do business better.

I intervened on the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), about his amendment 5, so I will not say anything more about that. The purpose served by amendment 6, as we discussed in Committee, is to say to the energy companies that all they need to do is save customers £100—so they will just save customers £100. I passionately believe, therefore, that we should not tell them just to save customers £100. Instead, we should deliver the biggest saving that we reasonably can through whatever device Ofgem delivers, but the moment that we put a figure on it, lo and behold, that is exactly what all the energy companies will deliver.

The hon. Gentleman has made some changes to amendment 7 since Committee stage. He knows I share his concerns about vulnerable customers and possible unintended consequences from the Bill, and I know the Minister will be keen to reassure us that the Government have got this covered, but I prefer amendment 9, tabled by the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves),

[James Heapey]

which has the support of many on the Select Committee and is well worth considering. The Government have looked at the vulnerable customer issue since Committee stage, and I wonder, given today's very sensible amendments, if they might run one more lap on this between now and consideration in another place.

On amendment 8, which we also discussed in Committee and which the hon. Gentleman has also come back with, my concern is that the list could be much longer. If we are to specify all the circumstances, why not designate another dozen or two dozen things that we could legislate for, if we absolutely had to? I am not convinced it is necessary.

I also have a problem with new clause 1, because the Bill needs to be temporary. As I said either on Second Reading or in a Westminster Hall debate, it needs to be a raid into the energy market, not an occupation. New clause 1 is a raid with a few troops left behind thereafter, which I am not sure I like very much. We want to ensure that Mr Nolan and his team at Ofgem can, in delivering the price cap, facilitate a transformation in the market that makes such legislative provisions redundant. The consumer-friendly, disrupted, digitised market that awaits will be so much cheaper that we will be glad to have made this slightly un-Conservative, temporary raid into the market, to deliver something on the other side that is much better for consumers.

Alan Brown: The Bill is designed to intervene in the energy market and correct market failure, which is why it has cross-party support, but not surprisingly, because it is a reaction to market failure, there are nuanced differences in how people think that can best be dealt with. One good thing is that everybody seems keen to protect the most vulnerable customers. The question is: what do effective competition and a fairer market look like?

One fundamental still being debated is whether the cap should be a relative or an absolute cap. The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), who has been absolutely consistent in his belief that it should be a relative cap, should be commended for sticking by that, although obviously that does not mean I agree with him. As I mentioned in an intervention, one concern about a relative cap is that, because of the bunching effect, we might lose the competitive tariffs at the bottom end. We heard evidence of that in Committee. Some of the newer energy companies argue that they could deliver the lower tariffs even if there were a relative cap, but these companies appeal to those who switch regularly. He says the switching market works really well. Well, it does for those who switch regularly, but we are trying to protect those who do not switch and are stuck on these rip-off tariffs, which is why I agree with an absolute cap.

That brings me to new clause 1, tabled by the Labour Front Benchers. I am struggling to get my head around this. Labour says it does not believe in a relative cap but it believes in a relative tariff, and it would not be a cap but somehow it would work better being relative. It is too big a contradiction for me. I am not sure new clause 1 would work in the way suggested, and for that reason, if it goes to a Division, I will not support it, although I appreciate what the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) is trying to achieve.

Let us look at who supports a relative cap versus an absolute cap. Ofgem, the regulator that will have to implement it and Citizens Advice are in favour of an absolute cap. Citizens Advice is a third sector organisation that works for the most vulnerable in society on a daily basis and often has to deal with those bearing the brunt of the Government's austerity agenda, and if it says it is in favour of an absolute cap, I think we should listen. Now let us look at the company the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare keeps. Signatories to his amendments include the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood)—two of the most right-wing, free-market capitalists in this place. That helps me to make up my mind.

7.45 pm

I do not think that amendment 6, tabled by the shadow Minister, works either. Despite the talk of soundbites in *The Sun* and other political soundbites, I do not think that putting an arbitrary figure into primary legislation is the way to address the problem, and so I do not think amendment 6 would work properly. Amendments 7 and 9, both tabled by Labour Members, show a disjointed approach, but the good thing is that both would protect vulnerable customers, so in principle I would support either. That said, amendment 9 has cross-party support, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), so if that were to be pushed to a vote, I would be more than happy to vote for it to provide those safeguards for vulnerable customers.

If we believe the market is broken, we need in principle to define what a successful market looks like, and Labour's amendment 8 sets out quite well what criteria Ofgem should use when considering whether the market is realigning itself much more fairly. I therefore support the principle of that amendment. I tabled my own amendment in Committee, but this one is much clearer and provides a better description.

The final amendment on the amendment paper is amendment 1. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) did not speak to it for long, but I empathise with his arguments. My only concern is that, for it to work properly, we would need the roll-out of SMETS 2 meters, as the SMETS 1 meters, which are currently being rolled out, do not enable what the amendment seeks to achieve in terms of automatically providing better tariffs for customers. None the less, I certainly agree with the principle of the amendment.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill and the amendments. Millions of consumers in the UK are facing challenges with their energy bills, and I find it outrageous that loyalty is punished by some energy companies. It is counterproductive, especially for those speaking up for the free market. We must be careful, however, not to commit the politician's syllogism from "Yes, Minister": "There is a problem. Something must be done. This is something, so let's do this." The amendments seek to ameliorate that.

I am not a great believer in the idea that the gentlemen in Whitehall know best when it comes to running energy, and I worry that the idea that said proverbial gentlemen in a panel are best placed to determine energy prices

gives succour to Labour ideas that it, as the state, is best placed to run the whole sector. The fact that Labour does believe that is precisely why I would not support any of its amendments but will stick with a Government who, notwithstanding their occasional prices and incomes board-type moments, represent a strong—indeed, the best—bulwark against socialism.

I will not go into huge technical details other than to praise the work and determination of my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), who has argued for a more dynamic solution to this problem, proposing a maximum mark-up between the ultra-competitive, consumer-friendly deals and the default tariffs that loyal customers pay. I supported his amendments and the intention to point out a better way of stimulating the market towards greater fairness via relative cap mechanisms.

Nevertheless, the fact is we are facing an urgent problem for which we need an urgent solution. To this end, I will support the Bill with—and, indeed, because of—the added sunset clauses, for which I thank the Minister, and which make this a temporary measure up until 2020. I hope that comments from me and others will point the way ahead at that time.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to support the Bill, and I am glad to have worked with the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), who was instrumental in its introduction and in pushing for the cap. It is disappointing that Ofgem required five months in which to implement it, but at least we shall have it in time for winter 2018.

The amendments to support and protect vulnerable and domestic consumers during the cap's implementation are of course welcome, and it is right for the Minister and Ofgem to take account of the distinct needs and circumstances of vulnerable consumers when setting the cap, but since entering the House I, like the hon. Gentleman, have developed a healthy scepticism in my opinion of the way in which regulators, including Ofgem, go about their business—or not, as the case may be.

More than a quarter of households that contain a disabled person—27%, or about 4.1 million—spend more than £1,500 a year on a year on energy, and 790,000 of those spend more than £2,500. In my constituency, consumers are overpaying for electricity by £5.5 million a year. There is no denying that high energy costs have a serious impact on disabled people's financial resilience. They limit those people's ability to access employment and training and savings, and their ability to participate fully in society. Vulnerable and disabled consumers face higher energy costs than any other consumers, and that must be factored into any consideration.

As we heard earlier, the amendments that are intended to establish either an ongoing tariff differential or a relative cap are simply not robust enough to ensure that consumers would ultimately benefit from them. There is a risk that both the relative tariff differential and the relative cap could trigger unintended consequences, such as energy companies' raising their minimum tariffs to meet the required difference from their maximum tariffs. That poses a series of questions about consumers' interests. Indeed, stakeholders such as Ofgem, the Government and Citizens Advice have warned that a relative cap would not prevent overcharging and might simply result in price increases for the best-value tariffs. There is

widespread agreement that an absolute cap is the best option if overcharging is to be prevented. Moreover, a relative cap might decrease the number of people switching providers or tariffs, which would clearly not be in the interests of consumers.

We need to know more details of the criteria that Ofgem must follow when conducting its review of competition for domestic supply contracts under clause 7. Those criteria are set out in amendment 8. It is essential that the Minister and Ofgem are as transparent as possible when setting the targets, so that the price cap does what it says on the tin. The hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey) spoke about time of use tariffs. I am extremely suspicious of those, because they will inevitably penalise families with children, who have little flexibility when it comes to controlling when they use their energy. I do not think any of us want that.

James Heappey: The hon. Lady makes a good point, but I think that there will automatically be technology in white goods, for instance, that will allow people to shift their demand to take advantage of time of use tariffs. Most families will save significantly as a result.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that clarification. I appreciate that such tariffs will benefit some consumers—I do not think anyone would deny that—but I question whether the system would be flexible enough to benefit all families with children, and others whose energy use cannot be as flexible as they might like.

The amendment to ensure that customers must benefit from the cap by at least £100 seems very arbitrary and risks unintended consequences. I agree with the hon. Member for Wells about that, and with my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). There is widespread concern that the big energy companies will use exemptions and green tariffs to ensure that they meet the target.

It is essential that the Bill delivers for consumers and that the period of the cap is used to deliver a fairer, more competitive market for consumers. It must deliver a change for consumers who have been overcharged for too long. There is consensus that the energy market is broken and needs to be fixed, which is why the Bill was introduced in the first place. It enables us to begin to do that, but we must ensure that we get it right and that there are no unintended consequences for the very consumers whom we seek to protect and assist. I know that the Minister will be mindful of that. We need to ensure that consumers benefit from action on this issue after the tariff is lifted in 2020 or 2023.

The launch of the independently chaired commission for customers in vulnerable circumstances by Energy UK in January will report on its findings and recommendations on energy companies, the Government, regulators and consumer groups towards the end of this year. I hope that the Minister or the Secretary of State will note that as we approach the end of the tariff cap, so that the voices of consumers can feed directly into the process of ensuring that they are offered as much protection as possible as the broken market is improved to become more fair and transparent.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson).

[Bill Grant]

It is clear that the energy market is not working for the consumer, and with that in mind, I am pleased to support the Bill. However, I firmly believe that these additional measures must be temporary. Permanent Government intervention in the energy market of the kind that is proposed in new clause 1 is, I believe, unnecessary. Indeed, things are already changing. As recently as 2010, there were only 13 energy suppliers in the United Kingdom; now there are well over 60. Independent suppliers are growing and, rightly, posing new challenges for the big six. They already account for some 20% of the dual fuel market.

The basis of healthy competition is enabling consumers to go elsewhere with relative ease if they find a better deal. Nearly 20% of households a year already switch suppliers. By making switching quicker and easier, we can make that figure even higher and force big suppliers to stop taking long-standing customers for granted as they have done for many years.

There are now about 10 million first-generation smart meters in operation in the United Kingdom. While the roll-out is progressing, there is a long way to go to meet the ambitious target of 53 million by 2020. In the context of the Bill, a key element is the roll-out of the SMETS 2 meters, which is due to begin this year. SMETS 2 consumers will benefit from quick and easy switching, and the meters should be intelligent enough to identify the lowest tariff. They have the potential to be a real force for competition in the energy market. At that point, there will be no need for the price cap, which is why it would not be prudent to introduce a permanent relative cap. It would be bad for customers, and it would work against the positive changes that will be made over the next few years.

New clause 1 is the product of a belief that markets simply do not work. As a Conservative, I believe that they can work. I note the progress that we have made, and the progress that we will make in the coming years. I acknowledge that the market needs the temporary cap, and I support the Bill as a means of protecting consumers, not only in my constituency but throughout Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom. I am sure that it will contribute to a reduction in the very real fuel poverty that some people endure.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I am delighted to speak about the Bill, having supported it throughout this Parliament and having been a member of the Bill Committee. I think it important that, when considering the new clauses and amendments, we consider the fundamental aim of the Bill, which is to guarantee protection for the 11 million households that are currently on the highest energy tariffs—as well as the 5 million vulnerable households that are already protected by Ofgem's prepayment meter safeguard tariff cap—by introducing a measured temporary intervention to correct a market that is currently letting down and ripping off thousands of people in my constituency, and millions throughout the country.

New clause 1 would allow the Secretary of State to make requirements in relation to a differential between the cheapest and the most expensive rates offered by suppliers: in other words, a relative price cap. In practice, that would mean that once effective competition was in place in the market—or by the end of 2023 at the latest

—and that tariff cap was removed, a maximum differential between the most expensive and the cheapest tariffs would be introduced. That goes against the principle of the Bill, which is to ensure that it is temporary. This should be a temporary measure to correct the market, and it should not allow Government intervention to remain permanent. This Bill is based on a mandate that came out of the Conservative manifesto, which set out a temporary intervention.

8 pm

Amendments 2, 3 and 4 would also mean that a relative cap was introduced, but instead of an absolute cap. I am sympathetic to the reasons for wanting a relative cap and its intentions; however, I am concerned that a relative cap on its own would offer little protection to people on poor-value single, variable and default tariffs. I believe an absolute tariff cap would better protect all consumers on single variable tariffs.

Ofgem said in its evidence that a relative cap would be gamed by larger suppliers, as they would be more likely to remove their cheapest tariffs than to reduce the most expensive ones, and MoneySavingExpert said in its evidence that a relative price cap would lead to the loss of the cheapest deals and therefore disincentivise switchers from continuing to switch.

The aim of the price cap is to protect consumers in the market without removing the incentives to switch. There is a risk in these amendments that consumers will not be protected and there will be no limit for the price of single variable tariffs, and also that there will be less of an incentive to switch. There is therefore a significant risk that introducing a relative cap, instead of an absolute one, could lead to increased prices for many consumers, and I am not prepared to vote for, or support, a measure that could risk my constituents' pockets.

I believe in a free market, but I also believe in a fair one, which is why I support this Bill as it seeks to put the interests of the consumers in my constituency and the country first, and repair a broken market through a temporary and intelligent measure. I understand and appreciate the concerns of other Members supporting a relative cap, but I am supporting an absolute one, and I shall conclude by echoing the sentiment expressed by the chief executive of Good Energy, a company in my constituency, when appearing before the Bill Committee, who said:

"If you have an absolute price cap, you will obviously see that the affordability of the lower tariffs for the big six will be less: you will see some shrinkage between the highest price and the lowest price. That is what we are trying to do."—[*Official Report, Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Public Bill Committee, 13 March 2018; c. 5.*]

Rebecca Pow *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Rebecca Pow.

Rebecca Pow: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; I am bringing up the rear, as they say.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I was not going to ignore you.

Rebecca Pow: Thank you.

I am delighted to speak in support of this Bill. It focuses on a temporary managing of the energy market, which has not been managed well enough, which is why we are talking about the whole concept of this Bill. I will speak briefly, and only to amendments 7 and 9. I do

not disagree with the sentiment of, and intention behind, these amendments, and above all it is, of course, vitally important that we look after the vulnerable in society, in particular in terms of energy, and especially when the market is deemed not to be functioning properly.

It is crucial that people can keep warm and cook the right food and that they are comfortable and well, but this Bill already addresses that. It places a new set of duties and powers on Ofgem to protect consumers on variable and default tariffs, and Ofgem already has a duty under the electricity and gas Acts to have regard to the need to protect vulnerable customers. We should also remember that in 2016 the Competition and Markets Authority made an order, following its energy market review, to put in place a safeguard tariff for customers on prepayment meters, and about 4 million people have benefited from that. Last year, Ofgem took the decision under its principal duties in the electricity and gas Acts to extend the safeguard tariff to customers in receipt of the warm home discount.

Ofgem must have regard to the need to protect vulnerable customers when exercising its functions under these Acts, and I would argue that that is already being done. However, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) that it is crucial that Ofgem uses its powers and uses them well and that its feet are held to the fire in this respect—to use an energy term. It also introduced an enforceable vulnerability principle into the domestic standards of conduct, making it clear that suppliers must do more to treat vulnerable customers fairly, and this must be done.

Realistically, therefore, these amendments seem to be overkill, placing new obligations on Ofgem that are not necessary; however, it must use the powers it has. Also, as many Members have said, the powers in this Bill are only temporary: the price cap operated by Ofgem is not intended to last beyond 2023, and I fully support that. By contrast, Ofgem's powers to protect vulnerable customers under the electricity and gas Acts are not limited.

It is necessary to bring in the fairness that this Bill has right at its heart. Its main aim is to place a new set of duties and powers on Ofgem to protect customers on standard variable tariffs. That is what this is really all about; far too many people have been taken for a ride. In 2016, about 11 million people were paying a total of £2 billion over the odds for their energy; that is simply not right. Individuals are said to be paying about £300 too much. Many people falling into this category are the elderly, and I am speaking on this Bill in part because Somerset has a particularly ageing population, and they have been taken advantage of, as indeed have many young people who are in rental accommodation because they are tied to one form or another of payment.

We must not mess about any further with this Bill. We must be able to see the wood for the trees; we do not want to bring in another lot of suggestions and regulations that delay the Bill, because it is more important than ever that its measures come into operation this winter. It is essential that we protect the vulnerable, but it is not necessary to legislate further on vulnerability, as suggested by amendments 7 and 9. I hope that on this basis the amendments will be withdrawn.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I thank all colleagues here this afternoon for their intelligent and sensible contributions to a debate

that has run for several years. We are now within striking distance of bringing this Bill to a conclusion and sending it off in good order to the other place. I particularly thank my relatively close—geographically speaking—party colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), whose dogged and intelligent scrutiny, along with that of his colleagues, has made this a much better Bill, and I pay the same compliment to the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and her Select Committee. This shows that when we work together we can deliver good legislation. I will respond to the amendments discussed today and my hope is that in doing so no Member feels obliged to press their amendments to a vote.

New clause 1, which we discussed at length in Committee and again today, seeks to introduce an ongoing, almost perpetual, relative price cap once the absolute price cap is removed. Like the Member speaking for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), I am a little perplexed by this amendment, as I said in Committee. The hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) has spoken so powerfully on many occasions against a relative cap and in favour of an absolute cap, and yet this new clause suggests bringing in the opposite: a relative cap on a perpetual basis. I will talk more about the issues we have with relative caps, but this is a little counterintuitive. It would also mean—this will be anathema to many colleagues who have spoken passionately today in support of a relative cap—effectively perpetual Government intervention in the energy market. There is strong agreement across the House in favour of competitive markets delivering the best for consumers. When those markets are broken, or regulation slips out of date, it is right to improve the powers of regulators, but perpetual Government intervention, particularly in setting prices, is not the way to deliver the best outcomes. Therefore, the new clause is not necessary.

Moving on to the comments on relative caps, Ofgem said in its evidence, which others strongly supported, that a relative cap will be gamed by the largest suppliers. If we introduce this hypothesis, it will be gamed. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) also pointed out, we also heard in Select Committee evidence sessions that there was overwhelming support for an absolute cap—now and then.

John Penrose *rose*—

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend wishes to intervene, and I will of course give way.

John Penrose: I hesitate to pray the Labour Front Benchers in aid of my argument, but the Minister has just quoted Ofgem in favour of hers, so perhaps it will make sense. Does she not agree that it would be commercial suicide for a supplier to raise its tariffs in the competitive market, to protect its position, were a relative cap to be introduced? I think the shadow Minister said earlier that it would be commercially suicidal or a kamikaze move.

Claire Perry: I am afraid that I have to disagree with my hon. Friend and reject that point. That is what has been happening for many years to the most vulnerable customers, who have seen price rises recently and who

[Claire Perry]

are not switching for a variety of reasons. We are trying to deal with that customer group today. I hope that the hon. Member for Southampton, Test will withdraw the new clause on the basis that it is not rational and not needed.

Amendment 5 proposes that a set period of five months be placed in the Bill. We debated that at length in Committee, and I believe that we are all seized of the need to bring the Bill into force in good order as quickly as possible—we do not want to wait any longer. We want the Bill to be in place by the time we rise for the summer recess, and obviously it has to go through the other place first. We want the caps to be transparent and to be applied in time for this winter, 2018, so that people can start to benefit and make savings on their energy bills immediately.

We heard from Back Benchers why they felt the five months provision would be difficult, and I will add my concern that if Ofgem were to go over such a legal limit, even by a couple of days, it could inhibit its ability legally to bring forward the cap. We must do nothing to reduce Ofgem's ability to consult on the cap and put it in place. It is worth emphasising again—I am sure the regulators and others are listening—that we want and expect the cap to be in place by the end of the year. I do not think the proposal in amendment 5 is either legally permissible or necessary.

Amendments 2, 3 and 4 were tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare and supported by many Members who have thought carefully about this issue. We have refined the Bill through the course of our discussions and made it into a better piece of legislation, and I am grateful for that. We have heard again today many of the arguments that we have heard during the Bill's passage. We are talking about a theoretical position in talking about a relative cap, because the only cap we currently have is the safeguard tariff, which is an absolute cap and which appears to be working to save customers money.

Our concern is that with a relative cap, we could see suppliers lifting their skirts on their cheaper tariffs, and that there could be an inhibiting effect on some of the innovations that my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heap) mentioned, with companies charging extremely low prices for time of use tariffs. We heard overwhelming evidence during the evidence sessions chaired by the hon. Member for Leeds West, and also in the Public Bill Committee, that absolute caps were considered a much better way of bringing forward the protections that we all want. That is the view of Ofgem, the Select Committee, Citizens Advice, moneysupermarket.com and some of the new energy companies, and I am persuaded that those organisations have the interests of the customers we are trying to help at heart.

I am also concerned that if we had relative caps, there could be a lot of gaming going on and a lot less transparency. We have talked about what would happen if suppliers lifted their prices. We know that the trouble we have is with a group of customers we refer to as disengaged. They are not digitally enabled; they tend to be older, on lower incomes and more vulnerable; and they are not as susceptible or sensitive to the price elasticity that would perhaps persuade others to switch.

The aim of this price cap Bill is to protect those customers, so I do not believe that it is necessary to accept those amendments.

John Penrose: I just want to point out that the criticism that the relative cap can result in an increase in switching rates and tariffs has equally been applied to the absolute cap. There has been criticism of both kinds of cap, not just of the relative cap.

Claire Perry: There has been a lot of criticism of both kinds of cap, but if we look at the one sort of cap that we have—the prepayment meter cap that is extended to vulnerable customers—we see that those customers have saved between £60 and £120 on the basis of that cap. It has actually worked to reduce their prices. I am pleased that my hon. Friend is not intending to press his amendment to a vote.

Amendment 6 seeks to ensure that we have a stated amount of the savings that might accrue. I think that is perhaps slightly mischievous, and it does not really reflect the consensual spirit that we have had throughout the passage of the Bill. I can imagine that the people coming up with these numbers were looking at the savings that we have discussed in relation to the prepayment cap, or indeed the £300 average difference between the most expensive and the cheapest tariffs in the market. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) said, we need to calculate volume as well as price to estimate the service, and we do not yet know what cap Ofgem will set. We also do not want to constrain Ofgem's ability to set the cap or to create targets for the big six to work towards as the maximum saving. I hope that, on the basis of that explanation, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test will be content not to press his amendment.

8.15 pm

Amendments 1, 7 and 9 bring us to the extremely important point of how we ensure that the cap does not in any way reduce price protection for the most vulnerable customers. I am proud to say that those customers have, over the past few years, been protected through the prepayment meter cap and through the extension of that price to customers in receipt of the warm home discount. We all believe that that is absolutely vital. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Leeds West said, it would be perverse for the cap to come in and for prices to go up for those customers. The requirements in the Bill for Ofgem to pay attention to its existing powers, which of course include a duty to protect the most vulnerable, are sufficient, and the Bill is in addition to and does not replace or replicate those duties. I am extremely keen to examine the point further without amending the Bill, so I will take it away and consider it to see whether there are other messages that we might convey to Ofgem to ensure that this extremely valuable point is not missed.

Frank Field: Might the Minister meet people to discuss amendment 1 further?

Claire Perry: There has been a huge amount of scrutiny, and I am hoping that we can get the legislation through to the other place, but my door is open. We want a well-functioning energy market that works for everybody and provides competitively priced energy.

I was asked an important question about the statutory instrument, which is also going through the House, that enables data sharing between the DWP and others. It has completed its pre-legislative scrutiny and will be introduced during the passage of this Bill. It is a vital and necessary part of ensuring that the powers in the Bill work.

Dr Whitehead: Will the Minister be clear with us tonight that the safeguard tariff and the absolute cap do not contradict each other and that they can be introduced together, so that the protections can continue? Is she convinced that that is the way forward?

Claire Perry: There is nothing in the Bill that interferes with Ofgem's ability to extend the safeguard tariff, which is part of an existing separate set of powers. By having this discussion, we are sending a clear message that we expect Ofgem to retain adequate protections for the most vulnerable consumers once the Bill is passed. I thank colleagues for putting that matter forward for debate today, because it is an absolutely vital point that we must get across. However, on the basis of my responses, I hope that the hon. Member for Leeds West will not feel the need to press amendment 9.

Amendment 8 essentially sets out the conditions that would determine success when we consider whether the price cap should be removed. As we discussed in Committee, it is not the job of Ministers to prejudge the regulator's work on what a good market will look like in two years' time. This country has seen some of the most rapid evolution in energy innovation, and in the future there may well be factors that are no longer considered relevant in establishing competition or factors that do not best address consumers' needs. I do not want to put anything into the Bill that would give energy companies something to target. The Bill is supposed to be about giving the regulator broad powers to ensure that companies deliver a better price for consumers, not try to engineer a particular outcome. I hope that the hon. Member for Southampton, Test considers that a sufficient explanation and will not press amendment 8.

It has been great to have so much cross-party conversation and discussion on this important piece of legislation. I forgot to mention the vital point made by the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) about green tariffs, but the process of setting such tariffs will be scrutinised as never before and we will have better, more transparent tariffs as a result. I hope that all Members are satisfied with the explanations I have provided and that we will not need to trouble the Lobby Clerks this evening.

Dr Whitehead: On the basis of the explanations that have been put forward, we will be happy not to press our amendments, but we will wish to press new clause 1, which has not been properly understood or responded to this evening.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 125, Noes 288.

Division No. 142]

[8.20 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara	Benn, rh Hilary
Amesbury, Mike	Betts, Mr Clive
Ashworth, Jonathan	Blomfield, Paul
Austin, Ian	Brennan, Kevin
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Brown, Lyn

Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Burgon, Richard
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cooper, rh Yvette
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Elliott, Julie
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fletcher, Colleen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glendon, Mary
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Healey, rh John
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lammy, rh Mr David
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca

Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Madders, Justin
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McInnes, Liz
Mearns, Ian
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Perkins, Toby
Pidcock, Laura
Pound, Stephen
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

Nick Smith and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Adams, Nigel	Atkins, Victoria
Afolami, Bim	Bacon, Mr Richard
Afriyie, Adam	Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Aldous, Peter	Baker, Mr Steve
Allan, Lucy	Baldwin, Harriett
Allen, Heidi	Barclay, Stephen
Amess, Sir David	Bebb, Guto
Andrew, Stuart	Bellingham, Sir Henry
Argar, Edward	Berry, Jake

Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey
M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr
Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr
Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea

Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir
Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir
Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas

Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Walker, Mr Charles
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mike Freer and
Wendy Morton

Question accordingly negated.

Third Reading

8.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Creating a more affordable and competitive energy market that works for British families was a central pillar of the Government's manifesto last year. Every household in the country depends on gas or electricity, or both—they are essential services on which we all rely. On average, each household spends about £1,250 a year on energy at home. It is one of our biggest household bills, and for the poorest 10% of households, energy is about 10% of their annual household expenditure. Yet in the past few years, prices for customers on standard variable and default tariffs have not declined; they have continued to increase. The further price hikes we have witnessed in recent weeks from a number of the big six suppliers are consistent with the analysis of the Competition and Markets Authority that that part of the market is not operating competitively.

The Government's ambition is to make sure that Britain has an innovative, competitive, productive and prosperous economy. To underpin that, we need an energy market that works to the benefit of consumers, workers, investors and, of course, the environment. This Government recognised, as did the CMA, that for 11 million customers on standard variable tariffs, the market is not working. In many cases, prices are above what they would be in a competitive market.

The Bill therefore focuses narrowly on a problem that has been exposed as highly significant: overpricing for consumers who have remained loyal to their energy providers. This segment of the market has displayed weak competition. Such behaviour on the part of the energy companies must come to an end, and the Bill, along with other measures, will help to end the abuse. The Bill requires Ofgem to introduce a temporary absolute tariff cap on SVTs—default rates—that will protect consumers. That will go alongside complementary measures enacted by this Government, including the roll-out of smart meters, together with other reforms that Ofgem is making to the market. This has been welcomed by new entrants in the market, which are providing more choice for consumers than ever before. A number of them provided evidence during the Bill's scrutiny.

I would like to take a moment to express my gratitude to hon. Members for the way in which they have engaged with the Bill throughout its passage. I thank Members on both sides of the House who have contributed to its development, especially those who served on the Select Committee, which gave the Bill valuable pre-legislative scrutiny, and those who served on the Public Bill Committee. The discussions were excellent and forensic, and the Bill has been strengthened during its passage through the House. I pay particular tribute to and thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth. I also thank the Clerks, the House authorities, the experts who gave oral evidence to the Committee, the organisations that took time to provide expert written evidence and my superb officials, who will continue their tireless efforts as the Bill proceeds.

I thank the Opposition Front-Bench team. In characteristic style, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) brought to bear his long-standing interest in and deep knowledge of these matters. Members

have offered challenges and insight throughout the Bill's passage, and their contributions will benefit the legislation. The debates have thrown light on important issues, such as the need for Ofgem to ensure that there is transparency when setting and reviewing the cap and to consider all customers, especially the vulnerable and the disabled, when doing so.

Our debates have resulted in a productive discussion on the important issue of the need for the exemption of green tariffs, about which my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth has written to members of the Bill Committee. My right hon. Friend is a passionate champion of green issues in the House, and that, combined with her advocacy for the consumer, has made this an ideal first Bill for her to take forward in her current role. We are grateful to her for that.

The debates have sent a clear and consistent message from the House that its expectation is that Ofgem should implement a robust price cap to be in place for the winter. The Bill will require Ofgem to protect consumers on standard variable tariffs. It will ensure that loyalty is no longer penalised while also ensuring that efficient suppliers can continue to do business.

As the House knows, the Government are committed to reforming the energy market. The Smart Meters Bill, which is progressing through the House of Lords as we speak, represents another important stepping stone towards a more competitive market. The Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill will ensure that British families are protected as we correct an intolerable situation in which, according to the independent competition authorities, consumers have been exposed to paying £1.4 billion a year more than they would in a competitive market. That abuse should end. The Bill will not only give Ofgem the powers to achieve that, but introduce the requirement that it should do so, and I commend it to the House.

8.41 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): You will be pleased to hear, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I will be brief.

I thank all Members who have contributed to proceedings on the Bill and all members of the Public Bill Committee, who worked diligently and in such a consensual way. I particularly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), who over the past weeks and months has spent many hours working on not only this Bill, but a great many pieces of legislation. I thank the Public Bill Office and the Clerks for their tremendous support, as always.

Somewhat unusually, I am delighted that we are here to send a Bill to the other place in a speedy fashion. The Opposition will support the Bill's Third Reading. However, the Minister and the Secretary of State, diligent as they are, may share some of my exasperation that wider Government inaction—shall we say?—and delay at the beginning of this Parliament has meant that millions of people are still suffering with big energy bills as the winter comes to a close.

The 2017 Conservative manifesto committed to implementing an energy price cap that would protect 17 million households. On 9 May 2017, the Prime Minister herself wrote of the cap in *The Sun*:

"I expect it to save families on poor value tariffs as much as £100."

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

Yet the policy was thrown into doubt when the Queen's Speech said merely that the Government would introduce "measures to help tackle unfair practices in the energy market to help reduce energy bills."

That was followed by numerous letters between Ofgem and the Secretary of State in which it was made clear that legislation was required, but the Government still did not introduce a draft Bill.

It was not until mid-October that we saw evidence of the Government's commitment coming to fruition, but even then there were reports that some in the Cabinet had no intention of seeing legislation on the statute book. Thankfully, pressure from the Opposition, and indeed from Government Members, has ensured that the Bill has made progress. A price cap will therefore eventually be in place, but the fact sadly remains that in nine days' time it will have been exactly a year since the Prime Minister wrote her commitment to energy customers in *The Sun*.

I am happy that we are here today—I commend the Minister and the Secretary of State—but it is disappointing to say the least that a year has passed and the cap is still some way from implementation. As a result, energy customers have not been protected during a winter in which we have seen some of the coldest weather on record. Prices have continued to rise, and in the past couple of weeks, British Gas has announced a 5.5% price rise, while EDF has announced a 2.7% rise.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test and other hon. Members attempted to improve this Bill and help the Government to ensure that their own commitments were met. Sadly, although the Minister was very amiable, the Government did not accept many of the amendments.

Caroline Flint: May I add another couple of dates to help Members to understand how long it has taken to get us here today? I think that, as I get older, collective memory becomes an even more important asset. It was in October 2011 when the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, held a summit to tackle rising energy prices, and it was in October last year—six years later—when we finally heard talk of a Bill.

Rebecca Long Bailey: My right hon. Friend is correct. I share her exasperation and that of many Members on both sides of the House about how long it has taken to tackle this very serious issue.

Briefly, let me turn to some of the amendments that were discussed—Members will be pleased to hear that I will not go through all of them. Amendment 6 would have required Ofgem to ensure that the tariff cap conditions resulted in customers on standard variable and default rates having their annual expenditure reduced by no less than £100, as per the Prime Minister's election promise. If the Government had accepted that amendment, it would have given energy customers confidence that the Government were serious about their commitment significantly to reduce the bills of millions of customers. However, the Minister said that she felt that the Opposition had been mischievous in trying to place a Government policy within a piece of Government legislation. I do not think that I need to say any more about that—we will not try to do so again.

After our discussions in Committee, we redrafted an amendment that we had previously tabled. Rather than proposing a hard stop date, amendment 5 would have simply ensured that the cap would be in place within five months of Royal Assent. Ofgem has stated that it will take five months from Royal Assent to implement the cap. It indicated that placing such a deadline in the Bill would not cause it a problem or hinder its process so, again, it was sad that our amendment was not accepted.

Similarly, new clause 1 would have developed requirements for a differential between a supplier's cheapest and most expensive rates after the termination of the cap. That would have offered a degree of ongoing protection for consumers while wider market reform could take place.

I wish to pick the Secretary of State up on a statement that he made on Second Reading. He said:

"Britain has long been a pioneer in not only the privatisation and liberalisation of industries but the regulation of these utility industries, too."—[*Official Report*, 6 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 206.]

I am afraid that I have to take issue with him. Although I am pleased that the Bill is completing its final stages today, the necessity of the Bill in itself demonstrates the Government's abject failure adequately to ensure that our UK utilities have been regulated. In the past year alone, £120 has been paid by every household in the UK for dividends to energy company shareholders. As I have said before, the six distribution network operators had an average profit margin after tax of 32% a year between 2010 and 2015, which equates to £10 billion over six years. During that time, shareholders received £5.1 billion in dividends, or half the net profit generated. In the past 10 years, water companies paid 1,000 times more in dividends than in tax. Three of them paid more in dividends than they made in profit in that period, which means that they were borrowing on the back of household bills to pay their shareholders. Radical reform of our energy market is needed—it is not optional, but necessary.

We have yet to see any response to Dieter Helm's consultation on the cost of energy, which included many proposals for reform. Perhaps the Secretary of State will confirm when a response to that consultation will be published. It is urgent that we have such a response if effective competition is to be achieved by the end of 2020, or indeed by 2023, when the energy price cap will definitely be lifted.

I support the Bill and I welcome this Government action, but, as I have said, the cap is simply a sticking plaster. I hope that the Government will now act speedily and listen to the comments of Members about the wider reforms that our energy market requires.

8.49 pm

Alan Brown: I will be really brief. Clearly, we all support the Bill, so there is no point in over-debating it and delaying things much further. As the Secretary of State said, an overpayment of £1.4 billion was collected from customers in 2016. Some £650 million of that was effectively excess profits that customers were paying to the energy companies. That proves the need for the Bill. We can argue that it should have been introduced before, but at least it is here now, so let us get on with it.

I welcome the Secretary of State's comments about ensuring that there are safeguards for vulnerable customers. That is really important; it is the whole ethos of the Bill.

I hope that vulnerable customers get the protection that they need. I know that the Conservative party and the Government really hope that the provision will be temporary and that there will be no further state interventions in the market. It would be fantastic if that were the case, but I am not sure whether that will happen—we will wait and see. That is the whole point of Ofgem having the correct measures and of ensuring that we understand how the markets and the companies work. It was interesting that the mere threat of the Bill was enough to make companies change their behaviour and start reviewing their standard variable tariffs. At the very least, we need to be willing to threaten further state intervention if the market is not working as it should.

If we really want customers' bills to come down, we will need further state intervention, including home energy efficiency schemes. I will finish with my usual plea about getting onshore renewables back on to the market because they are the cheapest form of energy at the moment. We know how successful the bidding process has been for offshore renewables, so let us get the cheapest form of energy back to market and help to bring down customers' bills. I commend the Bill and look forward to its implementation.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Economic and Fiscal Outlook

8.51 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):
I beg to move,

That this House approves, for the purposes of Section 5 of the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993, the Government's assessment of the medium term economic and fiscal position as set out in the latest Budget document and the Office for Budget Responsibility's most recent Economic and Fiscal Outlook and Fiscal Sustainability Report, which forms the basis of the United Kingdom's Convergence Programme.

Of course, we all look forward to the day when we have left the European Union and we no longer have to file this report. But while we are in the European Union, it is a legal requirement, as part of the stability and growth pact, to present our economic and budgetary plan. Owing, to the opt-out that we negotiated in the 1990s, there are no sanctions or actions should items of the plan not be met. In fact, the only stated requirement is to endeavour to avoid excess deficit. Now, that is something of which I approve anyway and with which we are happy to comply.

I am proud to talk about the record of this Government over the last eight years. We have reduced the deficit by three quarters and have now reached the turning point of debt falling as a share of the economy, which will happen in this financial year. As the Chancellor said in the spring statement, we are now in a much healthier position, but it is very important that we do not abandon this fiscal discipline.

In 2010, the economy was on its knees. We had the highest level of deficit since the second world war, youth unemployment was rising and 1.4 million people were left on the scrap heap. Since then we have turned things around, by reforming the economy and with our fiscal plans. There is a record number of new companies; real wages are increasing; we have record levels of employment; and there are positive signs right across the country. These strong economic fundamentals are down to the decisions of this Government.

We have reformed our welfare system to ensure that it always pays to go to work. We have reformed our education system to make sure that our children and young people have the skills that they need for the modern economy. We have made it easier for companies to take on staff. We have reduced corporation tax. Recently we have seen the two strongest quarters of productivity growth since before the financial crisis. Inflation is set to fall this year and we have seen an easing of pressure on living standards. But despite all this progress, every one of these measures has been opposed by the Labour party.

The shadow Chancellor has said that he sees business as the enemy. Labour Members have opposed our efforts to make Britain open for business and want to go back to the days of punishing taxes and red tape. They have also opposed our welfare and education reforms. *[Interruption.]* I hear mutterings from the Opposition Front Bench.

These reforms have been accompanied by fiscal discipline. Our fiscal strategy has been vital in boosting confidence in the UK economy and enabling growth in the private sector. We have brought down the deficit by three quarters, and at the same time we have maintained

[Elizabeth Truss]

high-quality public services. We spend more per student on education than Japan or Germany, and we have seen our results in reading improve against our international peers. Our health spending is higher than the EU average, and we now have record cancer survival rates. Through our fiscal prudence—that phrase used to be popular on the Labour Benches—we have been able to spend targeted amounts of money to boost our productivity. Infrastructure spending will be at a 40-year high as a proportion of GDP by the end of this period. We are tripling the number of computer science teachers and encouraging more students to take maths at a higher level.

We are now at a turning point. After the highest debt that we have seen in Britain's peacetime history, we will see debt as a proportion of GDP falling. To people who say that now is the time to turn on the spending taps, I say that would be premature. It is very important that we bring down debt as a proportion of GDP. We know that economies with high levels of debt see a drag on their growth rates and are less resilient to external shocks. We also know that we are spending a huge amount on debt interest. With the debt interest we spend—£50 billion a year—we could completely abolish council tax, business rates or fuel duty.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the most tempting phrases that we often hear from the Opposition Benches, but the one to be resisted most strongly, is “Borrow to invest”? Irrespective of what one does with the money, one is still borrowing it and it still has to be paid back.

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. We are switching spending from current spending to investment, and that is why we have a 40-year high in our infrastructure investment. He is absolutely right that any spending increases the national debt. Because of the actions of the previous Labour Government, who spent 45% of GDP in the public sector and built up a huge debt, it is our responsibility to bring the debt down and make sure that the country gets back in balance.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Bearing that strategy in mind, how does the Minister explain the fact that the debt has risen from 73% of GDP in 2010 to nearly 90% now, so it is higher than both France's and Germany's? Our debt was below those countries' at the end of a Labour Government who had invested in public services, bailed out the banks and saved people's savings.

Elizabeth Truss: I find it absolutely astonishing that the hon. Lady would say that, given that her party is planning to spend half a trillion pounds, increasing our debt. She has obviously not read the speeches of the shadow Chancellor and the shadow Chief Secretary. The 20% increase in debt that Labour is proposing would make us much more vulnerable to external shocks. The fact is that we have spent the past eight years repairing the damage done to the economy by profligate spending by Labour Members who did not fix the roof while the sun was shining.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend recall that the previous Labour shadow Chancellor accused the Government of going too far, too fast? He thought that throughout the

period of austerity we should have been spending more, leaving us with even further debt. The Government are to be commended for their robust approach.

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. Labour Members seem to believe that by spending more money and borrowing more, we can reduce debt. That simply does not add up. Under Labour's plans, we would be vulnerable to an external crisis, as we were when it was last in office in 2009. The Labour party seems to welcome that prospect. The shadow Chancellor said that the 2008 economic crash was a “capitalist crisis” for which he had been waiting for a generation. We have a Labour party that is actively planning a run on the banks if it gets into office.

Ruth George: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Elizabeth Truss: I have already given way to the hon. Lady.

Ten years ago, under Labour, we were in the grip of a financial crisis and scared for the future. It was a period of profligacy, when Labour was spending money we did not have. The state was 45% of GDP, and we saw the longest increase in debt since the Napoleonic wars. It crowded out the private sector, and youth unemployment was on the rise.

We have worked away at the deficit, replenished the public purse and got people back into work, and all while maintaining Britain's world-class public services. This report shows our sound public finances and our growing economy. [Interruption.] It is a shame that those on the shadow Front Bench seek to talk down our excellent public services. What this debate shows us is that it is vital we stick to the course.

9 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Meanwhile, back on planet Earth, a prerequisite of the UK's participation in the EU has been regular submissions of the Government's assessment of the UK's medium-term economic and budgetary position. I think the Chief Secretary to the Treasury will appreciate that one of the advantages of leaving the EU—for once, everyone on the Conservative Benches will agree—is the humiliation, wincing and cringing that the Government will forgo when they no longer need to submit their economic record to the scrutiny of European colleagues. The Government are rudderless, collapsing in on the weight of their own contradictions and economic ineptitude.

Let us turn to the record. While countries in the eurozone post a 10-year high in terms of economic growth, the UK under the Tories is left behind. Let us look at the seven deadly sins of the Tories. No. 1 is self-delusion, which we had in spadeloads from the right hon. Lady. Last year, growth in our economy was the lowest in the G7, and growth in the first quarter was the weakest since 2012. The Office for Budget Responsibility has now revised forecast growth down in both 2021 and 2022 since the Government's autumn Budget, and growth is lower in every year of the forecast compared with March 2017. The upbeat tone of the Chancellor at the spring statement betrays the economic reality that many have experienced over the last eight years of Conservative mismanagement, and while the Chancellor may want to

blame recent poor growth on a bit of bad weather, those of us living in the real world see an economy desperate for investment.

The second sin is sloth. The Government have provided the slowest recovery since the 1920s, and productivity growth is at its worst for two centuries. On productivity, the Government's record is one of failure. Productivity forecasts have been revised down this year and for every year of the forecast. While the Treasury celebrates a slight uptick in the productivity figures referred to by the right hon. Lady with a "thumbs up" emoji and manic optimism, the underlying figures show a fall in production and a fall in the hours worked.

Simon Hoare: Particularly in relation to point 2, were the hon. Gentleman to be making the report to the EU, which of the options of the shadow Education Secretary would he be reporting—would Labour's policy be shit or bust?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Those are not normal terms that we would use in the House.

Peter Dowd: I would rather not respond to a rather crude comment, which is quite frankly almost as crude as the Government's economic policy.

Number 3 is profligacy. The right hon. Lady talked about it, but here is a bit of profligacy: since coming to power, the Conservative Government have added more than £700 billion to the national debt. There was no mention of that. The UK's debt-to-GDP ratio this year stands at a staggering 86.4%, as referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George). The UK has a higher debt-to-GDP ratio than 20 out of the 27 other EU member states after eight years of this so-called economic miracle.

Sin No. 4 is misplaced pride. The Government have long prided themselves on being the so-called party of business, yet in eight short years they have managed to alienate the business community. Business investment has been revised down for the next two years, and businesses are holding off key investment decisions due to the uncertainty caused by this Government's shambolic approach to the Brexit negotiations. Ministers claim that the Government have raised an extra £175 billion from clamping down on tax avoidance—another visit to fantasy island—but they have refused to offer a breakdown of this figure, a list of the anti-avoidance measures involved and the amount each has raised.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What does the hon. Gentleman think would be the view of the extra 1.2 million businesses that have been created since 2010 on his proposed increases in taxation?

Peter Dowd: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman read the Labour party's "Funding Britain's Future"—our Grey Book. I will send him a signed copy for him to look at, and it will show that what he has said is arrant nonsense.

Under the Conservatives, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has become a pale imitation of its former self, with staff and resource levels cut by 17% since 2010. HMRC's failure to investigate Lyncamobile, one of the Conservative party's largest donors, for money laundering raises further questions about its independence and effectiveness. The Chancellor has been privately lobbied into supporting the former Prime Minister's UK-China

investment fund, but we now learn that it will be domiciled in the Republic of Ireland. That, presumably, is for tax purposes—it is certainly not for charitable purposes. So much for this being the most transparent Government in history.

Sin No. 5 is bullying. I have often heard Ministers speak about the resilience of the economy, but they say little about the resilience of the workers who work in it. The reality is that this Government have spent the past eight years laying siege to the poorest in our society and the public services they depend on. They bully the powerless and, in oleaginous fashion, suck up to the powerful. The Government's austerity agenda has left our local services on their knees. Since they came to power, local authority spending on early intervention has had a 40% cut in real terms—and so it goes on. I could give a catalogue or litany of these issues, but we know what they are. Rather than throwing our indebted and overstretched local authorities a lifeline, this Government are instead pushing ahead with further cuts.

With sin No. 6, we turn to education, which the Chief Secretary mentioned. The Conservatives are responsible for the first real terms per capita cut in schools funding in 20 years, and they have deprived 1 million children of a decent free school meal. *[Interruption.]* They just do not like the truth. The trebling of tuition fees, the abolition of maintenance grants and the sale of the student loan book have ensured that students leaving university today will be the most indebted in our country's history. Meanwhile, the NHS moves from a winter crisis to a spring crisis—and it will go on to a summer crisis—and the staff who run it continue to struggle. Under the Conservatives, they find themselves understaffed, underpaid and under-appreciated. While Rome burns and our public services crumble, the Chief Secretary can be found instagramming and tweeting selfies of herself at the Dispatch Box with other Treasury Ministers.

The last of the sins is pomposity, which the Government do very well: they are very good at pomposity. Listening to the Chief Secretary speak about the need for robust public finances and the merits of the free market, people would wonder which country she has been living in for the past eight years. After all, the Government have missed every deficit target they have ever set themselves. The former Chancellor's target for a 2020 surplus is but a distant memory—an inconvenient truth, quickly forgotten. Public debt stands at £1.8 trillion, and the Government have put more debt on to the shoulders of the people of this country than any other Government. When they came to power, they proclaimed that we were all in it together—we are all in it together right up to our necks—but eight miserable, oppressive years later, communities have been left to fend for themselves.

What will be the Tories' parting legacy as we leave the EU? It will be a divided, poorer, less confident, low-growth, low-wage, low-skilled and less productive country, all thanks to a clapped-out, self-obsessed and failing Government who rely on oligarchs to give them £160,000 bungs to help them to hang on to power—I hear the Foreign Secretary say, "Anyone for a game of tennis?"

9.10 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. Section 5 of the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993 requires Parliament to debate the content of this report on the

[Huw Merriman]

UK's economic and budgetary position. It is pleasing that although the UK has voted to leave the European Union, we are still complying with our obligation to submit the report.

Via the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, we are enshrining in law the rights and obligations that emanate from our EU membership. We are building with the European Union a new relationship, which I very much hope will allow our constituents to trade with, work in, study in and visit the EU. Rather than turning our backs on the EU, we are building a new chapter of our working partnership and friendship, albeit on different terms—on our own terms—which will, I am positive, enable us to maintain our positive relationships in mainland Europe.

We are debating the Government's assessment of the UK's economic and budgetary position—a position that we have developed since taking office in 2010. Interestingly, while I was researching our economic position, I came across a page on the BBC website from 2010. Boxes on the right hand side of the page contained our key economic indicators, which in 2010 were as follows: UK economic growth would slow to 0.2%, UK borrowing would hit £163.4 billion, UK unemployment would increase to 2.5 million and UK inflation would rise to 3.4%. Those were the key statistics, as reported by the BBC, as the Labour Government left office.

Fast forward to 2018 and—of course, we still have more to do—growth is projected to rise by 1.5% this year, UK borrowing fell to £42.6 billion during the last financial year, UK unemployment has fallen to 1.4 million and UK inflation fell to 2.5% last month. So if Labour Front Benchers want to talk about how things look now compared with how they looked in 2010, those are the key figures that they need to consider. [Interruption.] From a sedentary position, the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) mentions debt. The UK's total debt is still too high, but we have reduced the amount being borrowed each year from 9.9% of GDP when Labour left office to 2.6% now. We still pay £50 billion a year on our overdraft, and that is far too high. It is larger than the schools budget, and it needs to come down.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is vital that we do not confuse reducing the deficit with reducing the debt. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that according to the OBR's current forecast, the debt will not start to reduce until 2027 at the earliest? Does he think that that is good enough?

Huw Merriman: If we do not reduce the deficit, we will ultimately never reduce the debt. In January, we had a surplus for the first time, so we are getting there. As I say, however, the debt is far too large and needs to be reduced. I applaud the steps that the Government are taking to adopt a balanced approach, whereby we invest in our public services but get the debt down.

The debt causes me a huge amount of concern, because the interest bill will be paid not by my generation or those above me, but by the young. If Labour is serious about adding an extra £100 billion to the debt, the younger generation will be forced to pay back an extra £8 billion a year in interest.

It should not be forgotten that we have focused resources on key public spending commitments, such as health and increasing the amount we spend on the disabled. Opposition Members criticise us for the size of the debt, but when push comes to shove the austerity years, as they are often portrayed, have actually seen spending decreases at about the same rate as those advocated by Alistair Darling in the 2010 Labour party manifesto, so it is either one thing or the other.

My main point on how our economy is working is the fact that an extra 1 million people are now out of unemployment, compared with the last year of the Labour Government. That is crucial. Not only are those people paying into the economy, but they have opportunity, aspiration and hope. That was lost to many people when, yet again, the Labour Government left office with more people unemployed than when they had entered it. We have taken millions out of income tax by lifting the personal allowance from £6,500 to £11,850, reducing bills for 31 million people who still pay income tax. We have introduced the living wage, which will increase pay for 2 million people. One third of my working-age constituents are on the living wage, so it has a huge impact—they are £2,000 better off each year. All those measures make work pay, as seen by the increase in employment to 32 million people—the highest number since records began.

Finally, I would like to make a comparison with our European Union neighbours. Let us consider France. By 2015, we had created more jobs in five years in Yorkshire than have been created by France as a whole. The French are now looking to adopt our welfare reforms. They know that unless they modernise their welfare state, their unemployment rate will never be reduced from a shocking 9.7% to our rate of 4.2%. Some 1.3 million youngsters in France cannot find a job. It is our Government's policies, in this report, that our EU counterparts are now seeking to replicate. I therefore absolutely recommend the report. I am very proud to stand on the Government Benches on behalf of the party that has delivered it.

9.16 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to speak in this debate, although I do so with some trepidation and a degree of puzzlement.

I speak with trepidation, because in preparing for the debate I had a look in *Hansard* for the equivalent debates in the previous two years and discovered that nobody who spoke for the Scottish National party came through unscathed at the general election. Looking at the empty Benches behind me, it seems the curse of Section 5 has driven others away, too. I speak with puzzlement, because for the past six months every time I have been in the Chamber and we have talked in the European context about Government economic analyses, those on the Government Front Bench have been at desperate pains to persuade us that Government economic analyses are not worth the paper they are written on and are not to be trusted.

Members will recall that those analyses indicated that leaving the EU could take about 9% off economic growth compared with staying in the EU. That was one of the "benefits" of leaving the EU that the Government tried to hide and still do not want to talk about. The Government's own analysis indicated that even the much

hyped opportunities for striking new trade deals are likely to restore only about 1% of the 9% of the economic growth we will lose. It must therefore strike our European neighbours as somewhat ironic—it certainly strikes me as ironic—that the Government need a parliamentary vote to give them permission to send some numbers to the EU to prove how badly they are running the economy, at the same time as they are doing everything possible to avoid giving a meaningful parliamentary vote on the hard Brexit that threatens to blow even their own projections to smithereens. Perhaps that is what the Office for Budget Responsibility was talking about when it said:

“The probability of a cyclical shock occurring sometime over our forecast horizon is fairly high”.

Despite the brave words from the Chief Secretary this evening, the fact is that Brexit is already hurting the economy and the Government’s incompetent, ideologically obsessed drive towards a hard Brexit is making the damage even worse. The London School of Economics estimates that the average household is already £404 a week worse off thanks to the EU referendum result. The *Financial Times* puts the figure at 0.9% of GDP. That sounds like an innocuously low percentage, but it translates into £18 billion a year out of the economy. That is about £350 million a week. I have heard that £350 million a week somewhere before. It seems that the big white number on the side of the big red bus, telling us how much difference Brexit would make to our ability to spend on the NHS, was almost exactly correct—they just forgot to put the minus sign in front of it.

It would be bad enough if the pain of this economic failure was fairly shared. In fact, it would be nice if those who were ultimately responsible had to take any share of the pain, let alone a fair share of it, but of course, all those who are responsible seem to be doing very nicely indeed, thank you very much, because the costs of a failed and discredited austerity programme are being piled on to the shoulders of those who are least able to bear them—the very people any civilised Government would see as a priority to protect and look after.

Last week, it was confirmed that food bank use continues to increase. Why did the Chief Secretary not mention that in her overview of the economy? This week, my local authority, Fife Council—the third biggest in Scotland—reported a big increase in rent arrears owed by council tenants. Oddly enough, I predicted that increase last year, as did every MP in Fife and MPs from a number of other constituencies, including, in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). Why did he predict it? Because his constituency got hit by the roll-out of universal credit a couple of years ago. He saw what that did to his constituents’ ability to pay their council house rent. He warned that the same thing would happen in my constituency and elsewhere, and it still is happening. It is another symptom of a failed Government austerity

obsession that counts cutting the welfare bill as being more important than improving the welfare of the population.

Last week, we saw a signal moment in the history of Scotland’s relationship with welfare benefits, when our Parliament voted unanimously to support the Social Security (Scotland) Bill on its final reading. It is all very well for Westminster to give powers and for Holyrood to use them to try to bring in a modern, caring social security system, but when a major part of the Government’s fiscal success is down to slashing welfare benefits for those who most need them, when Scotland’s resource block grant is being cut in real terms by £213 million this year and by £531 million over the next two years, and when UK Government will have cut nearly £4,000 million out of the availability of social security payments in Scotland over a 10-year period, it is clear that the powers that Holyrood should be using to create a fair society are instead having to be used to mitigate the brutal unfairness that this Government are imposing on citizens across the United Kingdom.

Some might argue that this short-term pain can be justified if it leads to longer-term economic stability, but the longer term seems to get longer and longer every year that we have this debate. The OBR’s briefing indicates that even by 2022-23, we will still have a budget deficit of around £20 billion a year. The debt will be growing by £20 billion a year—it will not be coming down—and despite the modest improvement in some aspects of the outlook over the last few months, the Government’s promise to

“return the public finances to balance at the earliest possible date in the next Parliament”

is not going to be delivered. It will be 10 years before the budget deficit goes away—10 years before we even start to pay off the astronomical levels of debt that we are all having to fund.

Despite the shambolic mismanagement of the business of the House over the last few weeks, the Government will get the motion through tonight, with or without a vote. No doubt the carrier pigeon is standing ready and waiting, because they have just over two and a half hours to get the results of the vote to Brussels if they do not want to miss the deadline. However, there is, of course, a much bigger and much more worrying European deadline that is approaching very quickly. That deadline was arbitrarily and completely irrationally set by the House when it voted to trigger article 50, with no idea of what that would do to the economy. I, and I suspect many MPs on both sides of the House, have a sinking feeling that when we find ourselves a few hours from that deadline, the uncertainties that characterise the OBR report that we are debating tonight and the uncertainties that, as the Opposition Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) pointed out are driving investment away instead of attracting it to us—those financial uncertainties—will be even bigger on 29 March next year than they are today.

Question put and agreed to.

Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill [Lords]

Considered in Committee

[Mr LINDSAY HOYLE *in the Chair*]
Clauses 1 to 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.
The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.
Bill reported, without amendment.
Third Reading.

9.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Third time.

I would like to express my appreciation to right hon. and hon. Members and noble Lords in the other place for their thoughtful and constructive contributions during the passage of the Bill, including the positive engagement and support of the Opposition. I am indebted to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) for his work in bringing forward the Bill when he was a Minister at the Department for Transport and my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) for his insightful contributions based on his experience as Aviation Minister.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said on Second Reading, we can be proud of the safety culture across our transport sector in recent years, but we cannot be complacent. Safety and security must be our top priority. That is why we introduced the Bill: to strengthen the rules against those who shine lasers at aircraft while also making it an offence to shine a laser at cars, trains and ships for the first time.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome provision for a jail sentence of five years, which will give peace of mind to bus drivers, train drivers, vehicle drivers and aviation pilots, but can the Minister confirm that the Bill will apply to Northern Ireland?

Ms Ghani: Five years is indeed the maximum sentence and the maximum fine is unlimited. The Bill extends to the entire UK and will come into force in England, Wales and Scotland at the end of the period of two months beginning with the day on which the Bill is passed. In Northern Ireland, aviation and shipping are reserved, and the provisions relating to those will come into force at the same time as in the rest of the UK.

The Bill is now in a better shape than when it was introduced. In particular, the creation of an offence for shining a laser at air traffic control has received widespread endorsement and is one that the Government are happy to support. The Bill has been a great example of the important role Parliament has in strengthening legislation. I also thank those outside the Chamber who have lent their expertise to this important Bill. The UK Laser Working Group, chaired by Air Commodore Dai Whittingham, the Civil Aviation Authority, NATS, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, the trade union the British Airline Pilots Association, the national police air service and many others have provided invaluable advice on some very technical issues.

Our work in this area does not stop once the Bill is passed. The Bill specifically covers the risk posed by shining a laser at a person in control of a vehicle, but, as we discussed on Second Reading, the Government have

also announced new measures to tackle the sale of unsafe laser pointers. More than 150 incidents of eye injuries involving laser pointers have been reported since 2013, the vast majority of them involving children. In many of these cases, neither the children nor their parents have known the danger involved. The Government will work to raise awareness of the risks associated with laser pointers, including among schoolchildren.

In addition, the Government have pledged extra support to local authority ports and border teams to stop high-powered laser pointers entering the UK. On this, I would like to correct the record of what I said on Second Reading. This additional funding will in fact come from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, not the Department for Transport. I would not want to be seen as taking credit for another Department's work, but it is an example of Departments working closely together with a shared purpose.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) previously asked about timeframes. BEIS has already held an initial meeting with National Trading Standards to begin planning a joint project supporting local authorities. The planning will also include working with colleagues in the devolved Administrations. The Civil Aviation Authority will continue to provide advice and guidance for victims of laser attacks, and we will continue to monitor the issue, working with industry, the regulator and cross-Government colleagues to establish whether further steps need to be taken to tackle this unacceptable behaviour.

It has been clear throughout the passage of the Bill that the issue with which it deals is not politically charged or partisan. Parliament is acting collectively in the interests of the travelling public and those who work in our transport sector, and this Bill is for them.

9.30 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Bill has been much improved by the persistence of our Labour colleagues in the other place.

I am sure that the whole House would want to join me in sending condolences to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner). He had been leading for the Opposition on the Bill, but he has just lost his father, the distinguished Hull city councillor Ken Turner. Our thoughts and prayers are with him and his family today.

As no amendments were tabled, I shall highlight a few points in the Bill itself. It is a short Bill, consisting of two substantive and two procedural clauses. Clause 1 makes it an offence to direct or shine a laser beam towards a vehicle or a person in charge of a vehicle in such a way as to dazzle or distract the person driving, piloting, navigating or otherwise in control of the vehicle when it is moving or is ready to move. It results from an amendment tabled by Labour colleagues in the other place. There may be mitigating circumstances if it can be proved that the use of the laser was necessary in, for example, a rescue mission to attract attention of a pilot, or that the offence was committed by accident if the laser was being used professionally and all precautions had initially been taken to prevent an incident from occurring. The penalty will be imprisonment, an unlimited fine, or both. Advancing the deterrent sends a clear message that laser misuse will not be tolerated. It has also been clarified that a laser beam could be a pulsed

or continuous light, and it is defined in clause 3. The definition of the modes of transport to which the Bill will apply has been extended, thanks to the work of my Labour colleagues in the other place.

The Bill is an important piece of health and safety legislation to safeguard those who operate modes of transport from the effect of laser misuse. Lasers are being used to shine lights into the eyes of drivers, causing, according to the British Airline Pilots Association, four progressive stages of seriousness—distraction, disruption, disorientation and even incapacitation—which may have a sustained impact and could result in fatal consequences for the driver, passengers, the public, or a combination of those people.

The issue of laser misuse was first drawn to the attention of authorities by the aviation industry, but the Bill also covers drivers or navigators in charge of helicopters. A number of incidents have been cited, not least by police helicopter pilots. There have also been incidents involving planes, trains, ships, hovercrafts, submarines and road vehicles. The Bill's provisions extend to bicycles, motor scooters and horse-drawn carriages, as well as air traffic control.

Labour recognised the need for legislation that would build on the Air Navigation Order 2016, and along with the aviation industry and other transport operators, our Front Benchers have welcomed the Bill. It was our suggestion that such legislation could be introduced in the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill. We recognised the insufficient penalties resulting from the 2016 order and the very small number of prosecutions. The Bill will act as a far greater deterrent to laser misuse throughout the transport system. At this point I should mention the collaborative and cross-party work that has been done in both Houses—not least by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), who is not present this evening.

The other place amended the Bill to ensure that it was comprehensive in addressing the misuse of lasers, and in particular I thank Lord Tunnicliffe of Bracknell for his contribution. We are also indebted to the UK Laser Working Group, whose expertise has informed this Bill at all stages.

The Bill, while recognising the legitimate use of lasers, will ensure that those in charge of a vehicle are not put at risk, thus putting other transport users at risk, too. In the last year, there have been more than 1,000 cases, a sharp rise over a very short period of time. While that has not led to any accidents to date, in safety-critical industries we will not allow such risks to propagate, which is why we are supporting the Bill on Third Reading today.

The BALPA membership survey stated that half its pilots reported having experienced a laser attack in the last 12 months—55% of pilots, I believe—and that 15% had experienced three or more laser attacks. It is therefore heartening that external stakeholders also support the Bill, and I thank BALPA for its work in this area and all those working in transport who have advocated such legislation.

I can testify to the intensity of light from lasers, as some young people in my constituency shone a laser at me when I was out on an estate last summer. Momentarily blinded, I sought to look away, but that brief experience brought home the dangers of such laser devices, and permanent eye damage can occur if there is exposure to such light.

May I take this opportunity to thank the Clerks for their assistance through the passage of the Bill, my hon. Friends in this place and colleagues in the other place for their participation in the various stages of the Bill, and external stakeholders who have worked with us to ensure that it receives a smooth passage through its final stages?

Clearly, we are disappointed that the Prime Minister called a general election before we had the opportunity to enact the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, but, a year later, I am glad that we have been able to complete the Bill's passage in this place today. It just goes to show what can be achieved when all parties remain laser-focused on acting in the best interests of the public.

I trust that the public will recognise the importance of the Bill and that this risk across the transport sector will be deterred. There is clearly still a debate to be had about the ownership and use of laser beams, as Public Health England advises, but that will be for another Bill on another day.

I close by thanking all those who work across the transport sector for the application of their skills in keeping the public safe and ensuring that the UK has the highest of standards in transport safety.

9.37 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As this is a Third Reading debate and there were no amendments on Report, and given that we will support the Bill, I will not speak for long. I do, however, want to put on record my condolences to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner).

The Minister and shadow Minister both commended the work done in the other place in getting this Bill through. It has only two substantive clauses, however, so I am not sure it merits our having 800 unelected peers in the other place—which is not to say that the Bill does not have its merits.

The Civil Aviation Authority records that more than 11,000 laser pen incidents were reported at airports over an eight-year period and a BALPA survey has confirmed that half its pilots have experienced a laser pen attack in the past 12 months and 15% have experienced at least three attacks or more, which is alarming. Legislation is clearly needed to provide a deterrent, therefore, and this Bill does that. I therefore welcome the Bill, and we should move forward and get it into legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, without amendment.

Magor with Undy Walkway Station

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mims Davies.)

9.39 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I am delighted to have secured this debate, which gives me a great opportunity to make a positive case in the Chamber for a new walkway station to serve the communities of Magor and Undy, which lie just over the Severn bridges in my constituency of Newport East. The reason for holding this debate now is that I am mindful that the Department for Transport will start considering bids for the next new stations fund in the near future, and this is a shameless pitch to promote a unique bid. It is unique in that the community will be encouraged to walk and cycle to use the station, rather than driving to it, and it is important because the station would be located in a community in Wales with a fast-growing population.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Is it true that the community to which my hon. Friend refers to is growing because, thanks to her work on the Severn bridge tolls, more people are now moving from Bristol to enjoy the delights of living in Wales, and that they are moving into Newport—expanding the community there—and commuting to work in Bristol because housing is cheaper and education is better in Wales?

Jessica Morden: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She makes a valid point. Many more people are moving from Bristol to live in our corner of Wales, which is great. Many of them then travel across the border to work in England, and that creates an urgent need for new infrastructure.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) in paying tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) on the Severn bridge tolls. Many of my constituents commute through Magor. Does my hon. Friend agree that a station there would help to manage overcrowding, because people from Magor would not have to drive to Newport to join their trains there?

Jessica Morden: That is very true, and I will expand on that point later.

Rail travel in our area is growing and growing, and we need the infrastructure to cope with that. Young people in particular need to be able to access work opportunities, not only in Newport and Cardiff, but in Bristol and also further afield. Those are two of the reasons why the campaign for this new station has so much public support.

I pay tribute to the Magor Action Group on Rail, a volunteer group that has campaigned with great energy over the past six years for a new railway station. From small beginnings, it has worked tirelessly and professionally—my constituency is blessed with a number of former railway workers and enthusiasts—to develop this idea that has caught the imagination of the local community and businesses, which the group has kept involved every step of the way. The group has won support for its campaign by organising many productive meetings with the Department for Transport, the Welsh Government,

Network Rail, Railfuture, Sustrans, the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales and Transport for Wales. It has also secured the wholehearted support of the local authority, Monmouthshire County Council, and that of elected representatives of all political persuasions—not just myself, but Newport East Assembly Member John Griffiths, regional Assembly Members of different parties, the Magor with Undy Community Council and ward county councillors representing the area of Severnside as a whole.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady has outlined the importance of a reliable, working public transport system. Statistics show that 55% of rural households are within 8 km of a hospital, but does she agree that if they are without access to a network of reliable, timely public transport, the Government must look into funding better public transport links such as the one to which she refers to ensure that the general public can access such facilities?

Jessica Morden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. It is very true that we have to connect our rural communities in a better way, and I will say a bit more about that later.

Monmouthshire County Council says:

“The return of railway travel for Magor with Undy after many years will be welcomed by the community and offer many benefits. It will bring employment, retail, healthcare, education and leisure opportunities closer for residents and reduce traffic growth on congested local roads. It will significantly reduce the emission of greenhouse gases from transport and promote sustainable integrated travel.”

Indeed, one of the unique assets of the future station is that it would be one of the first community adopted walkway—rather than parkway—stations. It would be based in a central location within a 10 to 15 minute walk or cycle ride for all residents of Magor and Undy. That would tie in closely with the Welsh Government's Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013, which encourages a cultural shift that leads people to get out of their cars where possible. It is estimated that a new station in Magor would have the potential to reduce traffic on the nearby busy B4245 by as many as 60,000 vehicles a year. The walkway concept also allows room for a multi-modal, integrated approach to public transport, linking in with local bus services.

Sustrans, the charity that encourages walking and cycling, is particularly supportive of the walkway station concept. Gwyn Smith, the network development manager for south Wales, says:

“Magor has a good network of paths that can easily lead to the proposed station site giving excellent opportunities for active travel. The scheme is well supported by the local community and the evidence we have seen is that it will be well used and is technically more feasible than other options. Recent transport modelling Sustrans carried out in south east Wales area also demonstrates that journey times from this area (using Severn Tunnel Junction and Caldicot stations) to Newport and Cardiff are significantly shorter than by car, making using the train the preferred option for many.”

Sophie Howe, the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, has also voiced her support for the project, which she highlights will contribute to all seven of the national wellbeing goals outlined in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. She says:

“One of the goals of the Act calls on public bodies to contribute to a Wales of cohesive communities and this campaign has already highlighted what a positive asset this can be for the 6,500 people

who live in this village in promoting, for example, local businesses, tourism and tackling loneliness and isolation. Additionally, I believe this station will contribute to creating a more resilient Wales. It's believed that 11,000 vehicles a day use the B4245 and such a station could significantly decrease the CO2 emissions from these journeys and reduce traffic growth on congested local roads."

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Does my hon. Friend agree that such a model, which clearly involves huge environmental benefits and benefits from exercise, is something that we could consider right across Wales, especially if this project is a success?

Jessica Morden: My hon. Friend is exactly right. It is a good model for us to consider, and we could learn much from this unique project.

The Magor Action Group on Rail highlights the fact that the idea of a walkway station is obviously not new. It was the norm before the rise of the motorcar, when the local station was one of the main points of focus for the community. The group has recognised that in its development of plans for a community adopted station, integrating it with a much-needed community centre and ticket office. As group member Ted Hand said, the project is uniquely "back to the future". The ultimate goal is for the walkway station, community centre and incorporated orchard and fields to become a community hub for social activity and public transport.

It is important to note that there is a clear historical precedent for a station serving the communities of Magor and Undy, which sit between the city of Newport and the town of Caldicot. The villages were served by two stations, Magor and Undy Halt, until 1964 when the first of the two now-infamous Beeching reports initiated their closure after around 110 years of service. At the time of closure, the villages of Magor and Undy had a combined population of around 1,000. Since then, the population has grown sixfold and, with further local housing developments on the way, the population is projected to rise to around 10,000 in the next few years. The two villages have become extremely popular with those who commute to Newport, Cardiff and Bristol—48% of residents travel out of the area to work—but there are also major employers on the doorstep, with large Tesco and Wilko distribution centres, and the AB InBev Magor brewery, drawing in workers from across the wider region.

Population growth becomes all the more significant when we consider the remarkable increase in demand for services on the Great Western mainline, which passes through Magor and Undy. Over the past 20 years, Newport station has seen a 108% increase in passenger numbers and Caldicot has seen a 111% increase. Severn Tunnel Junction, which is currently the nearest station to Magor, has experienced a staggering 297% increase in entries and exits, which is the highest growth at any station on the Great Western mainline. The Cardiff to Cheltenham line, which takes in all the stations in my constituency, also has the highest user growth of any line emanating from Cardiff.

As I have highlighted on other occasions, the railway network in this part of south-east Wales had been plagued by chronic overcrowding and unreliable services, which is one of the many reasons why we need investment in our rail infrastructure, including new stations like Magor, to adapt to modern demands. On that note,

I pay tribute to the Severn Tunnel Action Group, another local rail group, which has done much to collect statistics and campaign positively for improvements in rail capacity over the years.

The Government's industrial strategy talks about the need to back economic growth corridors between Wales and England and the need to maximise the benefits to the Bristol-Newport-Cardiff area that will arise from the abolition of the bridge tolls. That is one reason why I have relentlessly raised the need to improve cross-border rail services at Transport questions and with the Secretary of State for Wales.

A Welsh Government-commissioned report from 2012 calculated that scrapping the Severn bridge tolls

"would result in an estimated increase in traffic across of 12%. This is equivalent to around 11,000 vehicles per day."

More recent Welsh Government modelling suggests that, in the area immediately adjacent to the Severn crossings, traffic levels could increase by around 20%, which clearly emphasises the need to get more people on to rail to reduce congestion. Much better rail services are needed.

The costs associated with building a new station are relatively modest. A new footbridge is already in place; the signalling arrangements would not need to be changed; an existing subway could be upgraded to become DDA compliant; and the track layout—switching or slewing—would not need to be altered. In any case, the estimated building costs, around £7 million, are more than offset by the excellent predicted return on investment, a high 2. Meanwhile, as the platforms would be on key relief lines, key inter-city services, including those between London Paddington and Swansea, would not be affected in any way.

Since 2012, the Magor Action Group and Monmouthshire County Council have made huge strides towards securing this new station for the community, getting the funding they need to progress through the eight-stage mandatory "governance for railway investment projects" process. The GRIP 1 and GRIP 2 studies were completed by April 2016, and an application was made to the UK Government's new station fund later that year. Although the bid was unsuccessful on that occasion, the group was offered a subsequent meeting with officials from the Department for Transport later in the year. The group was encouraged to resubmit as soon as it had completed GRIP 3.

Very positive news then followed, with Welsh Government Minister Ken Skates announcing that the Welsh Government would fund Monmouthshire County Council to complete GRIP 3. Good progress is being made on GRIP 3, and I understand that the second part of the options report is nearing completion.

The economic and operational viability of the proposed station is looking increasingly sound, and with continued support from the Welsh Government and further support from the Department for Transport, and with funding, the Magor Action Group is confident that a new station could be opened by the end of 2021. That would mean Magor station, alongside a new station at Llanwern, could form an important part of the South Wales metro project being developed by the Welsh Government, which is a key step towards a truly integrated transport network for our region.

[Jessica Morden]

Can the Department for Transport provide further support to the proposal for a new station, building on the very positive meeting between DFT officials and the Magor Action Group in November? Will the Minister meet the group to discuss its plans in more detail? I would also be grateful if he confirmed whether the group can apply to the new stations fund as soon as the GRIP 3 study is completed, regardless of whether the third round of the new stations fund has opened. The group has heard positive noises, and it would be good to get that on the record.

I again thank the group, including long-time members Ted Hand, Paul Turner, Laurence Hando, Phil Inskip, Councillor Frances Taylor—the councillor for Magor—Julie Wilson, Peter Wilson, Steve Lucas, Murray Ross and more, for all the work they have undertaken over the years. I emphasise to the Minister that I share their enthusiasm for their project. This is a group of very positive, creative and enthusiastic people, and it is a great pleasure to work with them as their constituency MP.

As group member Paul Turner has rightly said to me, the walkway station and potential community hub can “help reduce traffic pollution, improve road safety, provide better access to public transport and places of employment, attract visitors into the community and improve social cohesion and wellbeing in the villages for current and future generations.”

One of the most encouraging parts of the campaign is the way the group has engaged with the two local schools, Undy and Magor, to talk to pupils about the need for a new station. With that in mind, I finish with a quote from the pupils of Magor Church in Wales Primary School, who wrote a letter to the previous Prime Minister in support of a new station for the village. They said:

“Magor is such a stable, peaceful area and it needs to stay that way. Gorgeous areas like ours are quickly disappearing and ours cannot. A station at Magor would reduce car fumes which are harming the environment so please help us get a station.”

With that in mind, I would be grateful if the Minister gave this project his attention and had a close look, met the group and offered his support.

9.54 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): Let me start by congratulating the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) on securing this important debate about the proposed Magor with Undy walkway new station and on highlighting the good work done locally in her constituency to take this project forward. We understand how important stations are to passengers, but as well as providing access points to the network, they are often important to the wider community, especially in rural areas. We are therefore committed to providing funding to improve stations and provide new ones. For example, each franchise has funding set aside for station improvements, and we have continued the Access for All programme to improve disabled access to stations. As Members are no doubt aware, we have also run two funding competitions for our new stations fund and we have been able to make funding available to support the building or reopening of five new stations. Four of those are already complete, including Pye Corner in south Wales, and a fifth, Kenilworth, began running services this morning—this is the first time the town has had a rail service for more than 50 years.

Magor and Undy’s was one of the 19 bids we received in 2016 for the latest—the second—round of new stations funding. As the hon. Lady said, the proposal was for a new, accessible, two-platform station to the east of Newport, between the Newport and Severn Tunnel Junction stations. The proposal was to run three trains every two hours in each direction. The project was promoted by the Magor Action Group On Rail—MAGOR—and Monmouthshire County Council. I understand it also had support from the Welsh Assembly Government. The bid met the initial qualifying criteria and we felt there was a good strategic case for the station, connecting a growing residential area to the rail network. The site is also in an area where the population is expanding rapidly and, clearly, a new station would bring employment, retail, healthcare, education and leisure opportunities closer for residents and would reduce traffic growth on congested local roads.

However, we felt that the bid needed some further development work before we could support it. No analysis of the financial business case could be carried out and we felt that the timetabling impact of the new station needed further modelling. Last year, as the hon. Lady said, officials from the Department met MAGOR, the county council and Network Rail to give feedback on the bid and to suggest how it could be progressed. Like her, I have been told that this was a very positive meeting, and my team were impressed with the knowledge and commitment of the promoters. I know from the MAGOR website that the development work is continuing, and I look forward to seeing a more developed proposal in the future.

As for how the project can be taken forward and funded, hon. Members will no doubt be aware that the Government recently announced that they would be taking a new approach to enhancements going forward. The rail network enhancements pipeline sets out further information on the new approach the Government are taking to enhance the railway across England and Wales. This establishes a pipeline that moves the investment in rail enhancements away from a rigid five-year cycle, creating instead a rolling programme of investment, focused on the outcomes that deliver real benefits to passengers, freight users and the economy.

Through the rail network enhancement pipeline, the Government are committed to considering the regional spread of the overall portfolio of investments when making decisions about individual enhancements, making use of the Department for Transport’s rebalancing toolkit, where appropriate. However, we recognise that in the Department we do not have a monopoly on good ideas, which is why we have recently announced a call for ideas for rail improvements. We would welcome proposals from the hon. Lady and from her constituents that are financially credible without Government support, including for stations.

The rail network enhancement pipeline makes it clear that the Government’s focus for investment will be on the outcomes that make a real difference to rail users, rather than on the specific infrastructure, rolling stock or technology interventions to achieve that. I note and welcome the fact that the Welsh Government are taking a similar passenger-benefits-focused approach to procurement for the south Wales metro and the decisions on the appropriate technologies for delivery.

The Department will continue to liaise closely with the Welsh Government on the development of enhancement options for England and Wales, to ensure that Welsh requirements for increased capacity on the network are fully reflected. I hope that the hon. Lady and other Members have been reassured that the Government

remain committed to investment that will improve rail services and passenger experience in Wales.

Question put and agreed to.

10 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 30 April 2018

[IAN AUSTIN in the Chair]

Minors Entering the UK: 1948 to 1971

4.30 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 216539 relating to people who entered the UK as minors between 1948 and 1971.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. It is also a great honour to open the debate on this important and pressing issue. To make it clear, I do so as a member of the Petitions Committee, which agreed to schedule the debate today.

I thank the petitioner, Mr Patrick Vernon, whom I had the pleasure of meeting just before the debate, and the more than 178,000 people who have signed the e-petition in just a few days. It calls for an amnesty for any minor who arrived in Britain between 1948 and 1971. Its goes into further detail and includes a link to a story published by *The Guardian* on 30 March about Elwaldo Romeo, a man who moved from Antigua to the UK nearly 60 years ago as a child and who has lived and worked in this country ever since. Mr Romeo received a letter from the Home Office stating that he was liable to detention as he was classified as a “person without leave.”

After Mr Romeo experienced difficulty in producing documentation to prove his identity and right to remain in the UK, he was asked to report to the Home Office every fortnight and offered help and support to return home voluntarily, according to *The Guardian*. He is understandably anxious that the Home Office will pay a visit to his doorstep and forcibly detain him.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): During the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, the BBC interviewed a Caribbean Prime Minister who stated that this was “more cock-up than conspiracy”. Does that not influence our decision? It was an administrative mistake that must be put right as quickly as possible.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend is right. This is a mistake, not a conspiracy, with a well-meaning policy having been wrongly applied to people to whom it should never have been applied. I will go on to develop that point, as I am sure other right hon. and hon. Members will do.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am staggered by what the hon. Gentleman said about a “well-meaning policy”. How can the creation of a hostile environment, and putting a hostile environment into a policy, be well meaning? It is time for an apology, not thin, sanctimonious explanation.

Steve Double: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. [Interruption.] If she can wait to hear what I will go on to say, all will become clear. I hope that we can keep the

tone of the debate constructive and positive and put right what has gone wrong for the benefit of those who have been affected. Those who want to score political points may feel free to do so, but I will not seek to do that. I will seek to address the concerns of the people who have signed the petition.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the calm tone he has struck in initiating the debate. Given the previous intervention, does he agree that it is important to remember that a Labour Government first coined the term “hostile environment”? [Interruption.]

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes a good point.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) said from a sedentary position that my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) was wrong in how he had intervened.

Lyn Brown: It was your policy—2014.

Ian Austin (in the Chair): Order.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Lady keeps saying an awful lot of stuff from a sedentary position. Does my hon. Friend accept that the rewriting of history on such a sensitive issue is unhelpful to both sides of the debate and to moving this thing forward? For perfectly legitimate reasons at the time, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) referred not only to having a hostile environment but to seeking to flush out illegal migration. “Illegal” is the key word.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point. We must be clear in differentiating between illegal immigration and people who clearly have a right to remain in this country but, for all sorts of reasons, are having trouble proving that right. That is the difference. Governments of different parties over many years have taken various steps in robust action against illegal immigration, and rightly so, but when we conflate those two issues in the current situation we do a disservice to those of the Windrush generation who have a legal right to stay.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab) *rose*—

Steve Double: I will take interventions again in a while, but I need to make some progress.

Mr Romeo’s story was one of many that drew widespread public concern about the status of the Windrush generation and their children, who have spent most if not the entirety of their lives in this country. Other awful examples of treatment faced by members of the Windrush generation have come to light in recent weeks, which has rightly led to many people being concerned, as evidenced by the number of people who have signed the petition in just a few days. While the situation is devastating for all those affected and should never have happened, it provides all of us with a timely reminder to learn from a significant period in time for our nation.

Mr Cunningham *rose*—

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab) *rose—*

Steve Double: I will make a bit more progress.

It is almost 50 years since the Empire Windrush docked at the port of Tilbury on 22 June 1948. It brought with it the hopes and dreams of more than 500 passengers from the British West Indies who had just been given citizenship of the United Kingdom and colonies under the British Nationality Act 1948. Advertisements appeared in local newspapers in Jamaica offering cheap transport for anyone who wanted to make a living in the UK. Among that group of British subjects, nearly half were former servicemen who wanted to return to the nation they were enlisted to fight for during the war, while others were simply attracted to the better opportunities offered by what they affectionately and proudly called the mother country.

The arrival of the Windrush passengers marked the beginning of a multicultural, modern Britain. In the following decades, thousands from the Caribbean and other Commonwealth countries followed in their footsteps. Together, they became known as the Windrush generation. Most intended to stay for a few years, save some money and return to the West Indies. However, as time passed, the majority decided to remain and make this country their home. They married, raised families and built their lives here.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Simply put, if we have a proper inquiry, we can establish who did what, who introduced what, who gave certain instructions and what happened in the Home Office. Targets were part of it and a hostile environment was a part of it. Let us have a proper inquiry to clear it up and find out what actually happened so we do not have this Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Furthermore, it does not stop with the West Indies; I suspect other groups were affected by the same Home Office methods. We should have an inquiry and sort it out.

Steve Double: An inquiry may or may not be appropriate, but my focus is on getting things right for the people who have been affected by the current situation. There are lessons for the Home Office and the Government to learn for the future, and those lessons will be learned, but our focus now needs to be on righting a wrong that has happened and ensuring that the people affected get all the help and support they need at this time.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab) *rose—*

Emma Reynolds *rose—*

Steve Double: I will make a bit more progress, then take another intervention.

Life for the Windrush generation was often tough, but this was the generation that worked hard to overcome the many social, economic and cultural challenges of post-war Britain. I want to be clear: the Windrush generation are people who responded to our invitation to come to this country as British subjects, to help us rebuild our country in the years after the war. They are not economic migrants or asylum seekers. There was the generation that helped us build the NHS. They were

the people who contributed to Britain's re-emergence as one of the most prosperous nations in post-war Europe. Indeed, they also played a role in shaping modern Britain, by making us one of the most vibrant and multicultural nations in the world.

It is therefore totally shocking to hear about the treatment of some of the Windrush generation. It is appalling that some of them have been refused access to NHS services, have lost their job, or have even been threatened with deportation. I want to draw attention to the language of the petition that we are debating today. It asks for amnesty for the Windrush generation children. Amnesty is granted to someone who has been found guilty of breaking the law. In the context of the issue before us today, that would imply that the people in question are illegal immigrants. I recognise the intention of the petition but I want to make the important point that those people do not require amnesty: they already have the right to remain here.

Emma Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman is right that we must learn the lessons of what happened. However, my constituent, Paulette Wilson, was detained in October. She has been here for 50 years; she worked in the UK. She worked in Parliament, serving MPs. What she, her family and I want to know is why it took her detention, and the appalling treatment of others, for the scandal to come to light.

Steve Double: The hon. Lady makes a very good point and I shall go on to address it. I will just say that on this occasion the Home Office has been too slow to respond. There were warning signs about it and more should have been done sooner. I do not think anyone is arguing anything other than that mistakes have been made that have been deeply damaging to some people's lives, that it should not have happened, and that we must put it right and make sure it never happens again.

John Spellar: This relates to the core not just of the policy but of the practice. What is wrong with the Home Office? When it is quite clear that things are going wrong, why is there no overriding corrective mechanism? When senior officials are approached by Members of Parliament why do they not look at the matter again in the light of what has been raised with them? Why do Ministers not intervene to resolve it? Why has it taken so long, when it was crystal clear, in the press and in correspondence, that something was going seriously wrong? There is a deep structural problem in the Home Office immigration department that needs to be addressed.

Steve Double: I would respectfully say to the right hon. Gentleman that I suspect that question is more for the Minister than for me. I think it is above my pay grade to answer for the Government on those issues. I recognise that there are such issues, but perhaps the Minister will respond or the right hon. Gentleman will raise the issue later.

We have a duty to ensure that the Windrush generation and their children know that they are welcome here and belong here. We do not want any Commonwealth citizens who came to this country between 1948 and 1971, and who made their life in the UK as law-abiding citizens, to feel unwelcome or to be in any doubt about their future

in this country. It should be stated that the response from the Home Office to the situation has been too slow. Not only should the situation never have occurred, but once it was known about the Government should have spotted what was happening and reacted much more quickly. However, although they are late, I commend the actions that the Government are now taking to help the Windrush generation and their children to obtain their right to remain here. The clear apologies from the Prime Minister and other members of the Government have been welcome, but we need more than words. We need action to correct what has gone wrong.

The then Home Secretary first announced on Monday 16 April that she was establishing a new dedicated team to help the Windrush generation to evidence their right to be here and to access the public services that they need. The team aims to resolve cases within two weeks of evidence being produced. She also stated that the Home Office does not intend to ask the group to pay for their documentation. Last Monday she expanded on her initial statement by committing to waive citizenship fees for Windrush generation members who are applying for citizenship, to waive the language and life in the UK tests for them, and to waive the administrative costs for the return to the UK of Windrush retirees currently residing in their country of origin.

The former Home Secretary also announced other measures, which are of particular interest to the petition's signatories. First, the petition called for Windrush minors to be given the right to remain in the UK; indeed, most Windrush generation children in the UK are already British citizens. However, should they have to apply for naturalisation, the Government will waive the associated fees. Secondly, the petition states that

"the government should also provide compensation for loss and hurt".

The Government have said that a new compensation scheme will be set up for those who have suffered loss as a result of this issue. That is clearly the right thing to do, but I want to ask the Minister whether the Government have considered providing, as part of the compensation package, support and counselling for those who have suffered distress, stress and upheaval that has affected their day-to-day lives. It should not just be about recompensing them for costs they have incurred; it should also be about the support they need to get over, and move on from, their traumatic experience.

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend is laying out in useful terms the series of actions that the Government are taking. Does he feel, as I do, that the leadership provided by the new Home Secretary this morning will prove decisive? I have just come from the Chamber, where he said he will do whatever it takes to deal with the matter in a timely and decisive fashion. Does my hon. Friend share the confidence I have in the new Home Secretary?

Steve Double: Indeed I do. I would add that I think the previous Home Secretary was completely committed and was taking action to address the issue. However, I also have tremendous faith in the newly appointed Home Secretary and that he will get to the heart of the issue and make sure that things are put right and that the lessons that need to be learned are learned, and I shall come on to that point now.

Going forward, officials working at all levels of the Home Office must learn important lessons from the failures that have beleaguered the Windrush generation and their children. Those mistakes should never have happened, and there were warning signs, with Members coming forward in recent weeks to say that they were receiving casework relating to the issue.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Double: I shall make a bit more progress and then allow an intervention.

Ministers and Home Office officials must now focus on establishing the status of the Windrush generation and their descendants with all possible speed, and ensure that the administrative issue of missing documentation for our citizens is not a barrier. Windrush cases must be prioritised. The Home Office must also take a far more proactive approach; it cannot wait until a particular case has gone into the public domain before deciding to take action to resolve it. The Windrush generation are British—they belong here—and the task now is to provide them with a legal status that reflects that. I applaud the new team's intent to resolve cases within two weeks after evidence has been produced. It is vital to keep to such commitments to restore public trust in the Home Office.

In the past week, since I agreed to lead the debate, I have been engaging with lawyers and volunteers assisting members of the Windrush generation to secure their legal status, as well as with church and community leaders who represent the group. Many of those people are descendants of the Windrush generation or have a personal connection to them. They have expressed concerns about the capacity and effectiveness of the dedicated helpline that was set up to deal with inquiries. They have also asked whether there will be a deadline beyond which the Home Office might not be able to give further help to those seeking it. Will the Minister clarify what her Department will do to ensure that the helpline can give help effectively to everyone who seeks advice and whether there will be a deadline or cut-off point after which people might not get the help they seek from the new helpline?

I am glad the former Home Secretary acknowledged that the burden of proof to produce evidence of their legal right has been too much for some and suggested that the Department will deal with those individuals in a more personal manner. They came as British subjects and were not subject to any condition or restriction when they entered the UK. As we now know, many have found the task of producing evidence of their continuous residency here difficult. We need to prevent the Windrush generation and their children from facing further uncertainty over their status in the future and to allow them to be treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

On 22 June this year, we will mark the 70th anniversary of the arrival of HMS Windrush. That is a great opportunity to inform the British public about the positive legacy of that generation of pioneers and to help younger generations to appreciate the sacrifices that they have made for this country. I ask the Minister whether there are any plans for the Government to

[Steve Double]

commemorate that monumental occasion and to celebrate the contributions that the Windrush generation has made to British society.

With Brexit fast approaching, the Government must get things right for EU citizens. The Home Office must work now to ensure that the EU citizens who decide to stay here legally after Brexit know that they are welcome and that they will not face similar treatment.

John Spellar: A couple of times the hon. Gentleman has referred to these issues as though they have blown up only in the last few weeks. There may have been massive press coverage in the last few weeks, but the issues have been going on for months and indeed years. There has been an almost complete failure to recognise that and to put the corrective mechanisms in, which is precisely why a full restructuring of the immigration directorate in the Home Office is required.

Steve Double: I think I did say that there had been warning signs and cases for some time now that should have highlighted the problem. I do not know whether it is years or months; I have certainly been aware of it for months, but if the right hon. Gentleman says it is years, I am not going to argue with him. Whatever the period of time is, I think we all agree that action should have been taken sooner to address the issue, before it reached the state that it did in recent weeks. On that, we can absolutely agree.

To go back to the question of EU citizens, I commend the Home Office for preparing for a new form of identification that will be simple and straightforward, so that the 3.7 million EU citizens will have clear and secure documentation of their legal status. That is vital to avoiding similar mistakes. I hope the Home Office will be able to publish further details about the identification scheme in the near future.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that there is a chance that people will not be able to use iPhones to register their EU registration? That seems to be of concern to EU citizens. Could he confirm that one way or the other?

Steve Double: The hon. Lady raises a point I am not aware of, and it is not really for me to answer it. She might like to address it to the Minister, who might respond to it later. I was not aware of that point, but I am sure it is a valid and important one.

We need an immigration system that is effective and fair. Many of my parliamentary colleagues and I are of the belief that we need a robust and competent immigration system that is also fair and humane to people seeking to legally enter and settle in this country. We have to send clear messages to discourage illegal immigration, and this and previous Governments have taken steps to be tough in tackling it. I believe the British public want the Government to be tough on illegal immigration. However, we also need to be clear that this issue is not about illegal immigration, and to make it about the way the Government handle illegal migrants is missing the heart of the point. The Windrush generation are not here illegally and never have been. In this case, well-meaning policies have been applied to the wrong people, with

devastating consequences for the lives of our citizens. There are clearly lessons to be learned from that, but if our reaction is to weaken our stance on illegal immigration, we will be doing the British people a disservice.

A change of culture is needed at the heart of the Home Office, because the focus has been on policy and process and not on people. We must never lose sight of the fact that at the heart of these policies are people—individuals and families who deserve to be treated fairly and with dignity and respect. It is right that immigration needs to be managed—it cannot be uncontrolled—but managing immigration can be just and compassionate. That can be challenging, but it is essential. We must have a just and fair immigration system that works for the British people, that is open to people with the skills and talents to fill much-needed roles in our economy, and that is compassionate to the most vulnerable, the persecuted and the displaced.

We owe the Windrush generation a huge debt of gratitude for a number of things: for coming to help our nation at a time of need, for the contribution they have made to our nation for the past 70 years, for the lessons they have taught us and for the important part they have played in shaping modern Britain as a tolerant, multicultural nation. I suspect that we will soon owe them another thank you. Through this terrible experience, which I know has been painful and caused distress to many, they are again teaching us an important lesson: they are forcing us to look at the type of country we want to be in the future, they are making us look at the consequences, no matter how unintentional, of the way we handle immigration, and they are reminding us of the values that made us into the great nation of the modern post-war world. Those are important lessons, and this is an important time for us to be reminded of them.

In closing, I reiterate the crucial message that we want to send to all Commonwealth citizens who have legally chosen to make Britain their home: you are a vital part of this country, and we are immensely grateful for the contributions you have made to our culture, our economy and our society over many years. You have helped to make us the country we are. You and your children are welcome to stay here. We want you to stay, and we want to do everything we can to make you feel welcome.

4.57 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Mr Austin, I am very proud to stand here on behalf of the 178,000 people who have signed the petition. I am proud to stand here on behalf of the 492 British citizens who arrived on Empire Windrush from Jamaica 70 years ago. I am proud to stand here on behalf of the 72,000 British citizens who arrived on these shores between the passage of the British Nationality Act 1948 and the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, including my own father, who arrived from Guyana in 1956.

It is a dark episode in our nation's history that this petition was even required. It is a dark day indeed that we are here in Parliament having to stand up for the right of people who have always given so much to this country and expected so little in return. We need to remember our history at this moment. In Britain, when we talk about slavery we tend to talk about its abolition, and in particular William Wilberforce. The Windrush

story does not begin in 1948; the Windrush story begins in the 17th century, when British slave traders stole 12 million Africans from their homes, took them to the Caribbean and sold them into slavery to work on plantations. The wealth of this country was built on the backs of the ancestors of the Windrush generation. We are here today because you were there.

My ancestors were British subjects, but they were not British subjects because they came to Britain. They were British subjects because Britain came to them, took them across the Atlantic, colonised them, sold them into slavery, profited from their labour and made them British subjects. That is why I am here, and it is why the Windrush generation are here.

There is no British history without the history of the empire. As the late, great Stuart Hall put it:

"I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea."

Seventy years ago, as Britain lay in ruins after the second world war, the call went out to the colonies from the mother country. Britain asked the Windrush generation to come and rebuild the country, to work in our national health service, on the buses and on the trains, as cleaners, as security guards. Once again, Caribbean labour was used. They faced down the "No blacks, no dogs, no Irish" signs. They did the jobs nobody else wanted to do. They were spat at in the street. They were assaulted by teddy boys, skinheads and the National Front. They lived five to a room in Rachmanite squalor. They were called, and they served, but my God did they suffer for the privilege of coming to this country.

But by God, they also triumphed. Sir Trevor McDonald, Frank Bruno, Sir Lenny Henry, Jessica Ennis-Hill—they are national treasures, knights of the realm, heavyweight champions of the world and Olympic champions, wrapped in the British flag. They are sons and daughters of the Windrush generation and as British as they come. After all this, the Government want to send that generation back across the ocean. They want to make life hostile for the Windrush children—to strip them of their rights, deny them healthcare, kick them out of their jobs, make them homeless and stop their benefits.

The Windrush children are imprisoned in this country—as we have seen of those who have been detained—centuries after their ancestors were shackled and taken across the ocean in slave ships. They are pensioners imprisoned in their own country. That is a disgrace, and it happened here because of a refusal to remember our history. Last week, at Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister said that

"we...owe it to them and to the British people".—[*Official Report*, 25 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 881.]

The former Home Secretary said that the Windrush generation should be considered British and should be able to get their British citizenship if they so choose. This is the point the Government simply do not understand: the Windrush generation are the British people. They are British citizens. They came here as citizens. That is the precise reason why this is such an injustice. Their British citizenship is, and has always been, theirs by right. It is not something that the Government can now choose to grant them.

I remind the Government of chapter 56 of the British Nationality Act 1948, which says:

"Every person who under this Act is a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies...shall by virtue of that citizenship have the status of a British subject."

The Bill uses "British nationality" by virtue of citizenship. I read that Bill again last week when looking over the case notes of my constituents caught up in the Windrush crisis. Patrick Henry is a British citizen who arrived in Britain in 1959. He is a teaching assistant. He told me, "I feel like a prisoner who has committed no crime," because he is being denied citizenship. Clive Smith, a British citizen who arrived here in 1964, showed the Home Office his school reports and was still threatened with deportation.

Rosario Wilson is a British citizen with no right to be here because Saint Lucia became independent in 1979. Wilberforce Sullivan is a British citizen who paid taxes for 40 years. He was told in 2011 that he was no longer able to work. Dennis Laidley is a British citizen with tax records going back to the 1960s. He was denied a passport and was unable to visit his sick mother. Jeffrey Greaves, a British citizen who arrived here in 1964, was threatened with deportation by the Home Office. Cecile Laurencin, a British citizen with 44 years of national insurance contribution to this country, payslips and bank account details, had her application for naturalisation rejected. Huthley Sealey, a British citizen, is unable to claim benefits or access healthcare in this country. Mark Balfourth, a British citizen who arrived here in 1962 aged 7, was refused access to benefits.

The Windrush generation have waited for too long for rights that are theirs. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over. There comes a time when the burden of living like a criminal in one's own country becomes too heavy to bear any longer. That is why in the last few weeks we have seen an outpouring of pain and grief that had built up over many years. Yet Ministers have tried to conflate the issue with illegal immigration. On Thursday, the former Home Secretary said she was personally committed to tackling illegal migration, to making it difficult for illegal migrants to live here and to removing people who are here illegally.

Leo Docherty: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Lammy: I will not; I am just going to finish. Indeed, during her statement last Thursday, the former Home Secretary said "illegal" 23 times but did not even once say "citizen".

This is not about illegal immigration. This is about British citizens, and frankly it is deeply offensive to conflate the Windrush generation with illegal immigrants to try to distract from the Windrush crisis. This is about a hostile environment policy that blurs the line between illegal immigrants and people who are here legally, and are even British citizens. This is about a hostile environment not just for illegal immigrants but for anybody who looks like they could be an immigrant. This is about a hostile environment that has turned employers, doctors, landlords and social workers into border guards.

The hostile environment is not about illegal immigration. Increasing leave to remain fees by 238% in four years is not about illegal immigration. The Home Office making profits of 800% on standard applications is not about illegal immigration. The Home Office sending back documents unrecorded by second-class post, so that passports, birth certificates and education certificates get lost, is not about illegal immigration. Charging teenagers £2,033 every 30 months for limited leave to remain is not about illegal immigration. Charging someone

[Mr Lammy]

£10,521 in limited leave to remain fees before they can even apply for indefinite leave to remain is not about illegal immigration.

Banning refugees and asylum seekers from working and preventing them from accessing public funds is not about illegal immigration. Sending nine immigration enforcement staff to arrest my constituent because the Home Office lost his documents is not about illegal immigration. Locking my constituent up in Yarl's Wood, meaning she missed her midwifery exams, is not about illegal immigration. Denying legal aid to migrants who are here legally is not about illegal immigration. Changing the terms of young asylum seekers' immigration bail so that they cannot study is not about illegal immigration. Sending immigration enforcement staff to a church in my constituency that was serving soup to refugees is not about illegal immigration.

The former Home Secretary and the Prime Minister promised compensation. They have promised that no enforcement action will be taken. They have promised that the burden of proof will be lowered when the taskforce assesses Windrush cases. The Windrush citizens do not trust the Home Office, and I do not blame them after so much injustice has been dealt out.

I quote Martin Luther King, who himself quoted St Augustine, when he said that

"an unjust law is no law at all."

I say to the Minister, warm words mean nothing. Guarantee these rights and enshrine them in law as soon as possible, and review the hostile environment that turns everybody in this country who is different into someone who is potentially illegal. Some 230 years after those in the abolitionist movement wore their medallions around their necks, I stand here as a Caribbean, black, British citizen and I ask the Minister, on behalf of those Windrush citizens, am I not a man and a brother? [Applause.]

Ian Austin (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, but we are not supposed to have applause. I understand how strongly people feel about this issue, but that is the rule.

5.9 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I, too, begin by paying tribute to Mr Vernon, the petitioner.

There is a great deal in what the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) said that everyone of conscience, sensitivity and feeling can agree with wholeheartedly. On any view, this has been a shocking episode, and it has inspired feelings of some shame—shame because this is not the country we are, these are not our values and this is not the kind of country we aspire to be. Forgive me for repeating a point that does bear emphasis and on which I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman: the Windrush generation are British. They are part of the warp and weft of this nation. They have made a profound contribution—in business, science, commerce, sport and industry. We all feel profound distress at the way some individuals—far too many individuals—have been impacted.

It is right that we pause to think: how did it come to this? It is important to step back and look, with a little granularity, in a little detail, at what happened. It seems

that the Immigration Act 1971 provided that those who arrived before it came into force should be treated as having indefinite leave to remain, despite not having the specific documentation. Afterwards, of course, people required the document in the passport or whatever it was. It is now tolerably plain that attempts to clamp down on illegal immigration have had unintended and wholly unacceptable consequences. The system has failed. It has acted indiscriminately and in a way that causes us the shame that I mentioned.

We may be able to derive a small sense of solace. I have been encouraged, to some extent, in hearing the response of the Government. There has been no attempt to deny that what happened was wrong; no attempt to pretend that the system has worked as it should have; no attempt to deny the impact, which is profound; and a fairly, if I may put it like this, grovelling acknowledgement that the system has gone wrong.

We can take some small comfort, too, in seeing the speed and robustness of the response. That is quite right. The taskforce has been set up not to hinder applicants, but to help them to demonstrate that they are entitled to live in the UK. That is quite right. It has been tasked with resolving cases inside two weeks, because for individuals such as Elwaldo Romeo, who was referred to with great articulacy by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), it must be a peculiar form of torture, almost, to feel that the Home Office could come knocking. These cases must be resolved quickly, because justice delayed is justice denied. No language tests—quite right. No cost—quite right. A helpline—quite right. Also and importantly, those who made their lives here but have retired to their country of origin must be able to come back to the UK. Fees must be waived. It is right that the Government are working with embassies and high commissions to make that the case.

What is the net effect of all this? It means that anyone from the Windrush generation who now wants to become a British citizen can. The net effect is that the burden of proof has, in effect, been shifted. Something adverted to by the right hon. Member for Tottenham was compensation. That scheme should be run by an independent person, and I understand that that is the Government's intention. Yes, things have gone wrong, but it is absolutely right that the Government have acted decisively, without seeking to cavil, deny or shift the blame to anyone else.

Where I respectfully—with great and genuine respect—apply a slightly different context to the points that the right hon. Gentleman made is that I think we must, when speaking about the issue of illegal immigration, emphasise that there is a distinction and explain why there is that distinction. The reason we draw the distinction is that illegal immigration, as distinct from the immigration of those who came here in the Windrush generation and subsequently, encourages exploitation of the most vulnerable. It is a cruel and pernicious way to behave.

Illegal immigration is also unfair on those who play by the rules and do the right thing. They include, by the way, people from the Windrush generation, who, exactly as the right hon. Gentleman described with great articulacy, answered Britain's call to come to our country to help, work, support and build. They did the right thing. The truth is that some of the most vociferous critics of those who try to game the system—those who get round it

and try to bend the rules—are often those people who have played by the rules, come to this country and done the right thing. We must draw that distinction not just because it is right, but because it is fair to those who have played by the rules.

The other point is that we should not seek to infantilise people by suggesting that the rhetoric about being tough on illegal immigration is new. It is not. It is entirely appropriate that, in the past, Governments of all stripes have talked and acted tough. Let us take a moment to consider what has applied. In 1982, under a Conservative Government, the NHS began treatment charges for illegal immigrants. That has the advantage of common sense, one might think. Those people who have come here legally need to feel that they are getting a proper share of public services and that they are not being wrongly diverted.

In 1997, the Government instituted checks by employers on people's right to work here. In 1999, measures were imposed on access to benefits. We were then under a Labour Government, of course. In 2008, civil penalties of up to £10,000 were imposed for those who employed illegal migrants. I do not criticise any of that, and to suggest that what has happened now has emerged from a clear blue sky is misleading and unfair to those who are in the eye of this storm.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I shall make this point now, because it is one that those listening to the debate will not necessarily know. When it comes to healthcare, emergency treatment is available to all, regardless of who they are; it is more routine and elective care for which there are, rightly, checks. I am not criticising my hon. Friend; I am just making sure that people understand that no one is denied emergency care in this country.

Alex Chalk: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for clarifying that point; he is absolutely right to do so. The point I was making about the context is that measures have accrued over time. I am grateful to him for that point of detail.

I do not quote what I am about to in the interest of inflaming matters, because I do not think we should be in the business of inflaming matters; we should be in the business of cold, cool assessment. However, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) was right when he quoted an Immigration Minister from 2007, who described his policy as flushing illegal migrants out and

“trying to create a much more hostile environment in this country if you are here illegally.”

I do not think that, at the time, that was a particularly unreasonable thing to say. And it was John Reid, as Home Secretary, who said:

“We need to make living and working here illegally ever more uncomfortable and constrained.”

The reality is that Governments of all stripes have talked and acted tough.

All I really want to say is that this is a shameful episode. As has been indicated, it is a case of error, not conspiracy. It is incumbent on this Government, because they happen to be in office, to make things right, but we owe it to the people of this country, whether they are here from the Windrush generation or from elsewhere, to look at this coolly, frankly and, above all, fairly.

5.19 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I would like to say to the people who came here, who are our teachers, our nurses, our cleaners, our carers, our bus drivers and our train drivers: thank you. London would not be the city it is today, and my part of London—the best part of London, which is south London—would not be what it is today, but for the Windrush generation.

My mum was of an earlier generation than the Windrush generation. She came here in 1947 to train as a nurse, and worked in mental health for the rest of her working life. Until I was four years old, I did not understand that there were any countries other than Ireland, England and those in the Caribbean, because all her friends in nursing were from Ireland or the Caribbean. They were the only people who wanted to work in the large psychiatric hospitals of the '60s, '70s and '80s.

I am not here today to compete in any way with the amazing oratory of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), but to try to get justice for three of my constituents. I have been racking my brain since this issue came to the fore, thinking about how those people, who came to see me, could have been treated unjustly and about how they can now seek support.

I want to bring the case of Kenneth Ellis to the Minister's attention. Ken came to the UK in 1962, aged 8, to join his parents, Herman and Ivy Ellis, both of whom were UK citizens. He still has his dad's UK passport and birth certificate. He attended schools in Wandsworth. For a short period, sadly, he was in care under Wandsworth Council.

He first came to see me in 2013, and I tried to find out how I could help him to provide proof of his residency in the UK, backdated to 1962. That sounds an awful lot easier than it actually is. I contacted the Inland Revenue. It said that it had records, but it could not release them back to 1962 unless the Home Office asked for them. I contacted Wandsworth Council, but it informed me that it did not keep records of that age. I was told that if I could get the landing card from when he arrived, that could help. However, we now know that those landing cards were destroyed. As a result of the last five years of attempting to define his status in a country where he has lived for over 50 years, he has been unable to work, his relationship has broken down and he has lost his home.

I have known about Trevor only since 13 April. His mum and dad, Eastlyn and Grafton, came to London from Barbados in 1961. Eastlyn qualified as a nurse at St. Peter's Hospital, Chertsey, in 1965. Trevor joined them in 1967, aged 8, arriving with his grandmother, Myrtle. In the last 50 years, Trevor has never left England—he may have never left Mitcham, for all I know.

Trevor worked for the Blue Arrow agency for years, taking time off only when Eastlyn became unwell and he wanted to care for her. As a result of an administrative error with the agency, he was sent his P45. On receipt of it, he could no longer work. Every employer he went to—even Blue Arrow, which he returned to—said that he did not have the paperwork to ensure that he could work, so nobody would take him on. As a result, he has been out of work for the last 18 months and reliant on his 83-year-old mother.

[*Siobhain McDonagh*]

Neville's case is slightly different. He came to Britain in 1973, aged 17, to join his parents, Thomas and Deslin, both of whom were UK citizens—to prove this, I have their expired UK passports. Deslin's passport says, "I Kenneth Blackburne, Knight Commander of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George, Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, Captain-General and Governor-in-Chief in and over the island of Jamaica and its dependencies, request and require in the name of Her Majesty all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford every assistance and protection of which she may stand in need. Given at King's House in the island of Jamaica on the 19th day of April 1961." Neville's father's passport reads, "Given by Geoffrey Campbell Gunter, Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. Issued at King's House in the island of Jamaica, the 6th of July 1960."

Despite that, Neville cannot define his immigration status. He has spent money. He has had pro bono support. He has been evicted from his home. He has not been allowed to work. He has not been allowed to claim benefits. I have chased the Home Office for the last six years to try to sort out his immigration status, and I am ashamed to say that, to date, I have failed. Neville now cares full time for his mother to enable his siblings to work, knowing that their mum is cared for. It is simply not right that Neville or his parents should have been treated in this way.

All we are asking for is justice, and the right for these three men to go out and work to support themselves in the way that their parents taught them.

5.26 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin, and to follow the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (*Siobhain McDonagh*), who made an incredibly powerful and moving speech.

The right hon. Member for Tottenham (*Mr Lammy*) was absolutely right when he pointed out that we cannot forget history. We should not try to forget history, warts and all, the good and the bad. Any nation that tries to pretend that all its history is one or the other is a nation that is not at ease with itself and that is trying to fool its residents.

It is important for both the Labour party and the Conservative party to remember where quite a lot of this stuff came from. Looking back to the middle and the end of the Blair-Brown premiership and the early days of the coalition, both the main parties in this country had become terrified of either the British National party or the UK Independence party. We saw them nibbling away at our bases; we saw them pandering to prejudices, very often long held, but very rarely spoken of. We saw it in industrial areas; we saw it in all sorts of areas in this country.

I do not like using the phrase "dog-whistle politics", because I always think it is a blunt instrument. To an extent, however, Governments of both persuasions—of both colours—were under the most enormous pressure to be tough, and sometimes we slightly lost our nerve. Principled mainstream politicians lost the resolve to kick back against that, to face it down and to say why

that narrative was wrong. I am absolutely concerned that, as our concern grew, so did some of these policies, which were put in place by both Governments, and which, with hindsight, might have been phrased a little better and should have been thought of a little more deeply.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (*Alex Chalk*) made an incredibly powerful speech, which was thoughtful and sensible—his hallmarks. He was right to draw our attention to some of those quotes from Labour Ministers involved with the Home Office or with immigration specifically. John Reid, now the noble Lord Reid, said as Home Secretary:

"We need to make living and working here illegally evermore uncomfortable and constrained."

We also heard how the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (*Liam Byrne*), when immigration Minister, said:

"What we are proposing here will, I think, flush illegal migrants out. We are trying to create a much more hostile environment in this country if you are here illegally."

I intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (*Steve Double*) to draw our attention back to the different definitions. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister, the former Home Secretary, the current Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (*Yvette Cooper*)—the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee—who has joined us, and all of us should and must be at the most enormous pains to point out that division of public policy. All of us will have been annoyed and irritated over the years, when we have entered into debates with members of the public, who could be constituents of ours or not, in which asylum seekers, refugees, legal immigrants and illegal immigrants have all been put into one pot. Instead, we should look at the silos and the policies that flow from that.

My right hon. Friends who are involved in the Home Office, and who are at the head of Government, have made clear the Government's shame at what has happened and have made clear their apology. I cannot think of a single colleague on the Conservative Benches who would demur from that position.

I happen to be one of those Conservatives who has been perfectly relaxed about immigration and the freedom of movement. As somebody who is a quarter Irish, a quarter Greek and half Welsh, and as somebody who was born and brought up in Cardiff, how could I not be relaxed about immigration? Cardiff's marvellous docks were a huge melting pot for the world's nations as they came to work in and grow our south Wales economy. They enriched south Wales not just financially, but culturally, and we owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

We have to be clear. We must not throw the baby out with the bath water by conflating, yet again, the clear legal definitions of legal and illegal migration. The Windrush generation are not becoming British citizens. As the right hon. Member for Tottenham has said, they are British citizens, and the law seeks to confirm those rights and privileges.

In central and local government, not just in the arena of public policy, but across the piece, we have moved too much towards the "computer says no" approach—to use the "Little Britain" phrase—where boxes are ticked

or they are not. In any future arrangement, we must ensure that officials and Ministers who are dealing with these often complex matters have the opportunity—the space, as it were—for more discretion and discernment in taking important decisions.

As the Member for North Dorset, and as someone who has never had their right to be in this country questioned, I am not sure that I can envisage how people's lives must have been turned not just upside down, but inside out. Like one of those snow domes, their lives have been shaken, and the whole picture of their everyday lives has become so distorted that they cannot recognise it and they feel like aliens in their own country.

I take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) when he intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay: people fall into saying it is either a cock-up or a conspiracy. I would be the first to stand up and say so if I believed something was a conspiracy, but I do not. I think it was genuinely an oversight. "Oversight" may be a trivial word to use, as it in no way encompasses the emotional gamut of how people have had to respond to these issues, but I take enormous comfort from the fact that we as a Government are seeking to put these things right.

As the right hon. Member for Tottenham reminded us, and as I pointed out in my opening remarks, we should not forget history, and nor should we seek to rewrite the welcome, or sometimes the lack of it, that the first Windrush generation received. On the posters in the bed and breakfasts in Kensington, Notting Hill and Portobello Road that said, "No Irish, no dogs, no blacks", the blacks were always at the bottom of the list—dogs were preferred to black people. Other issues included the colour bar and access to housing—the Rachmanisation of the London housing stock.

We should not delude ourselves. These people answered the clarion call of the—I use the phrase of the right hon. Member for Tottenham—mother country. Just as they had answered in time of war, so they answered in time of peace. The battlefields of the first and second world wars were indelibly stained not only with the blood of white Anglo-Saxons, but with the blood of empire—of people who realised that the values that we were trying to defend and the attempt to deter and defeat the foe were right. It was right for them to come to fight alongside us. I am never quite certain that that debt has ever been truly recognised.

As we all know, the 1968 speech cast a long shadow over the immigration debate. People would often veer away from discussing immigration for fear of being accused of having racial or racist tendencies. We have moved on from that, but, by golly, when such events come about, we have to pause to remind ourselves, and to reinforce the fact, that the debate is not anchored by racial prejudice or a racial agenda in any way.

I do not like the phrase "Illegals will be flushed out", but I fully support, as I believe do the vast majority of people who are here legally, irrespective of colour, the need to be firm and resolute in our approach to migration to this country, for the reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham alluded to. We need to ensure that those who are here legally are given the warm embrace of a friend and neighbour, through which we entirely recognise the unquantifiable contribution that they make to our society, not just economically, but socially, culturally and from a community base.

My right hon. Friend the Minister is all too aware of the scale of the task and the speed with which it needs to be completed, as is my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, whom I welcome to his new position. Nobody should be under any illusion as to the seriousness and determination of Her Majesty's Government, not just to resolve the problem properly, promptly and speedily, but to ensure that the "computer says no" response, and this sort of problem, do not arise again.

5.38 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I thank Patrick Vernon OBE for launching the petition and creating the space we urgently needed to discuss these awful and totally avoidable events. I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for his exceptional speech and his tireless advocacy on the issue; my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for her forensic interrogation and analysis of the former Home Secretary's actions; and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who has so effectively led on the issue from the Front Bench.

Let me make it clear: this issue is personal to me, because, like many Londoners, I have family who are part of the Windrush generation. Lucy and her husband Cecil came here to help to rebuild Britain. Lucy is a fabulous, dedicated and caring nurse who worked in the NHS for her whole life, and Cecil is a skilled artisan. So, before I start, I will say, "Thank you", to Lucy and Cecil for all they have done, and to all the Lucys and Cecils who came, worked and served our country—often, sadly, in brutal, racist circumstances.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about the importance of the Windrush generation to the whole country, our public services and our economy. Will she join me in thanking not only all those who have helped to build our country, but all those who have been so badly and shamefully hit by what has gone wrong in the Home Office, who have nevertheless had the bravery and strength to speak out, including telling their stories to the newspapers and to Amelia Gentleman, who has obviously played such an important role in telling their stories?

Lyn Brown: I certainly will, and I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention.

Cecil and Lucy really believed that they could make this country a home, and that it would be fit for their children and their grandchildren, and they did make it a home for them. They thought that they had secured for themselves and their children a place that was warm and welcoming. However, I assure Members that their family are angry now, because the contract they had with this country has been broken by this careless, callous Government. Their faith in this country has been crushed. They, their children and their grandchildren feel betrayed.

It is not just my family who are angered by that betrayal; many of my constituents, whether they have family among the Windrush generation or not, believe that this Prime Minister's policies have betrayed a generation of their friends, neighbours and families.

[Lyn Brown]

I do not know how many of my constituents have been caught up in the Home Office's "hostile" immigration strategy, because many people have not made their way to my door yet. However, I urge them to do so, so that I can help them sort this situation out.

One man, who I will call Gem, contacted me early last year. Gem travelled from Jamaica in 1969 and has lived here legally ever since. However, in August last year his housing benefit suddenly stopped, on the basis that he

"had no recourse to public funds."

That was certainly news to him.

Gem has not kept hold of every official document that has come through his door for the last several decades, so when the Home Office demanded evidence for every single year that he had lived here he was understandably devastated and overwhelmed. I do not think many of us could produce that much evidence on demand; I certainly could not.

Gem was told that he would have to secure a new passport from Jamaica, at great expense and at a time when he was unable to work. The £2,500 fee for naturalisation was well out of the question. He now faces eviction, due to rent arrears, and he tells me that he has to report regularly to the immigration centre, as if he was a criminal. A few days ago, Gem's daughter called the new hotline, but she is still waiting to be called back. I have contacted the Immigration Minister on Gem's behalf and I will be happy to give her his details after this debate.

Gem is not the only constituent of mine who has been harmed by this "hostile" environment. Jessica travelled to Britain in 1970 from Dominica. She is 58 now but still remembers an immigration officer stamping her passport with the words, "Indefinite right to remain". She grew up in this country, and she has worked and paid taxes here for the last 39 years. Last month, however, she was fired from her job with a local charity that supports migrants and refugees, on the basis that she could not prove her right to work in the UK. It is a bitter irony that someone who has worked to help those at risk because of immigration policies has now fallen victim to those policies herself. Jessica said:

"I have always been a positive person, but this is a terrible situation."

I do not think that anybody could have failed to notice the oft-repeated use by the former Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), of the phrase "compliant environment" last week. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) said:

"Whether it's compliance or hostility, it's still a policy which has led to this debacle".—[*Official Report*, 23 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 633.]

Gem and Jessica will receive absolutely no comfort if I tell them that, although they have lost nearly everything, the Government did not mean to be "hostile". That is cold comfort, because let us be in no doubt that this scandal is leaving a legacy of fear and anxiety among the communities and individuals that it has betrayed.

Nevertheless, I welcome the Government's pledges to waive fees for members of the Windrush generation as they apply for documents and rightful naturalisation,

and to scrap the requirement for a citizenship test, as well as the free services that they have created for the victims. Those were absolutely the right things to do, but the problem stems from the policy itself. The "hostile environment" has been hardened over time, in the service of an arbitrary target. That is hardly the way to encourage careful evaluation of an individual's rights.

The canned response that we keep hearing from the Government is that the Windrush generation are different, or an exception. We know the phrase, "the exception proves the rule", and there are already new cases coming to light of British citizens from other backgrounds who have been caught up by this Government's approach. So how many exceptions will it take before the rule is changed? Will cases that do not appear to be Windrush related need to make their own headlines before they are recognised? If so, that is not only nonsensical, but cruel.

The right to appeal through an immigration tribunal was scrapped, for most cases, by 2014. When, on top of that, there is no longer recourse to legal aid, the inevitable wrong decisions are so much harder to challenge. I hope that the new Home Secretary will fix this matter urgently, although I do not hold my breath.

"Regret", no matter how bitter or heartfelt, cannot take the place of a substantial policy change. It is simply not good enough to redress the consequences each time after the fact. Policy change is the only way to prevent this situation from happening again, but even that will not undo the damage that has already been done; that pain will never go away. The petition that we are considering rightly calls on the Government to take into account "loss & hurt". The "loss" of a job, of benefits, of medical treatment, of pensions, or of citizenship can be measured.

Emma Reynolds: Does my hon. Friend hope, as I do, that the compensation scheme will be put in place sooner rather than later, because some people have been detained, some have been deprived of healthcare and some have been deprived of benefits, and they have also all gone through terrible anguish during the time that this scandal has been going on?

Lyn Brown: My hon. Friend is, of course, obviously right, because we can—possibly—put a financial value on the financial "loss" incurred by loss of jobs, benefits and so on, but the "hurt"—that is, the loss of faith and the impact of the deep betrayal—is much more complex and much more difficult to assess in monetary terms, so I ask the Minister to ensure that whoever is appointed to run the compensation scheme is encouraged to think long and hard about the lifetime impact of these losses.

The Windrush generation undoubtedly made a huge contribution to rebuilding our country; many of them also fought in the war. They came at the Government's invitation, stayed at the Government's invitation and worked year after year after year, because they were needed, so there is a real stench of betrayal about these recent events.

I am lucky—so lucky—that I have an amazing family. I have not only Cecil and Lucy, who have done so much for this country, but their children, including my brother-in-law, Colin, who I love to bits, and his daughter, my niece Aimee, who I love more than life itself.

My family have been lucky not to fall victim to the changed immigration laws, but, make no mistake, we are very angry. We are furious. We need more from the Government. We need mistakes to be rectified quickly, with generous compensation, and we need less dangerous policies coming from the Government. It is now time for the Prime Minister, as the architect of the hostile environment policy, to take responsibility, because it is her policy and her watch, and it is for her to be held to account.

5.50 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am grateful to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I am pleased to be able to speak in this important debate.

I will speak relatively briefly, but first I want to declare that I entirely support the sentiment of the petition. My constituency has a significant population with a Commonwealth background across Aldershot and Farnborough, which are in the borough of Rushmoor: people who have built their lives in the borough and who contribute a great deal at every professional level. I am very pleased to put on record my appreciation of the contribution that that population makes. Aldershot, as a borough, shares an even longer history with our Commonwealth, going back to the late 19th century, when a great number of imperial troops were stationed in its garrisons. The contribution of our Commonwealth population has, as has been said, a long historical precedent. Today, members of our community with mainly Indian and Pakistani heritage live with a significant Nepalese community, and that is something of which I am extremely proud.

We have heard some eloquent and moving speeches, but rather than talking about the rhetoric surrounding the issue, I will touch briefly on the action that the Government have taken in the past few days and weeks. I am grateful that the Minister is here; I am sure she will offer further reassurance about the series of actions the Government have taken so far. It is important that the Government have waived the fee for anyone who wishes to apply for citizenship—for those who do not have any documentation and those who do. The waiving of the requirement to do the knowledge of language test is important, as is the fact that the children of the Windrush generation will be able to apply to naturalise at no cost. It is also important that those who have lived here for a long time and have then returned to their country of origin are able to come back, and that the associated fees will be waived.

I am encouraged that we have a dedicated team helping to identify and gather evidence to confirm the existence of individuals' rights to be in the UK, and I would be grateful for any updates that the Minister might provide on that taskforce's latest actions. I understand that, as of last week, 23 people had already obtained the documentation they needed, with nearly 100 appointments booked to help more people. I am encouraged by that, but any further update from the Minister would be much appreciated.

I am pleased, too, that no one affected will be charged for any documentation that proves their right to be here, and that anyone who wishes to obtain a formal residence card can do so free of cost. Given the emotions around the subject, which we have been described eloquently today, I am reassured that there will be no removal or

detention as part of any assistance to help those citizens get their proper documentation. It is important that we put that on record and that it is clearly understood. I am also reassured by the fact that a new website will provide information and guidance for people who need support, and will give examples of the type of evidence required for the formal process.

In addition to that series of actions, it is important that the Government now get the tone right. That is why, earlier today in the Chamber, I was encouraged by hearing the new Home Secretary clearly outline that the matter is of the highest importance. He did so in personal terms, saying that "it could have been my mother, my brother or me." The new Home Secretary gets this. He gets the emotional importance of the matter and the sense of justice that people associated with the Windrush generation want to see fulfilled. He also said, "I will do whatever it takes to get this right...we will do right by the Windrush generation." He then went on to say, "Like her, I am a second-generation migrant". He was referring to the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), and to the fact that she "does not have a monopoly" on anger. That is very true, and the only response from the Government now, while there is justifiable anger, needs to be one of calm, compassionate efficiency. I am reassured that the Government will resolve the episode in a serious and determined manner, but also in an empathetic and gracious one.

5.56 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Austin.

In many ways, our debates over the Windrushers have been too small, too fixated on destroyed immigration documents or on who knew what when. Like those of EU citizens, the interests of the Windrush citizens have not been given the attention they should have been afforded; they have been afterthoughts as far as too many UK politicians are concerned. The political game has seemed more important than the people whose lives are affected, and the point scoring more important than sorting the matter out.

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

The debates are too small in another way, too. They are about a group of cases regarding the symptoms of a policy malfunction, not about the policy malfunction itself. It is not, as was suggested earlier, simply a structural problem in the Home Office. The anti-immigration rhetoric of successive UK Governments has created an environment of xenophobic mistrust, hate and fear. The "go home" vans that the Prime Minister created in her previous post of Home Secretary were a development from Gordon Brown's "British jobs for British workers". We know, too, that the Government of Clement Attlee was not the benign, welcoming and inclusive regime it has recently been painted as. We know that the Ministers in that Government wanted immigration to be a temporary phenomenon. I am afraid I cannot agree with the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) on that, although I welcome many of his very measured remarks on the topic.

Racism runs deep in the political psyche here. A bias is embedded in the minds of many politicians that will not easily be dislodged. Windrush is not some

[Deidre Brock]

isolated case, and it is not an aberration or a deviation from the norm. It fits right into the institutional racism of this place. From the attempts of Attlee's Ministers to turn the ship away to the Immigration Act 1971, and on to the vicious, hostile environment of the current Government, there is a thread of hate linking the attitudes of the generations. Those attitudes have driven public perceptions too, in the casual racism we all too often see. The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) can testify to that, I believe, with the appalling flood of bile that is directed at her.

Even with that evidence so easily available to us, all the attitudes persist here, and that has driven the debate on a number of issues, not least of which has been the debate on our relationship with the EU. For all that nonsense about that bus with the promise to pay the NHS millions every week, the main driver of the leave debate was racist. It was an argument of exceptionalism—an opinion that we are somehow better than everyone else. It has continued into the aftermath too, with the Government's disregard for the worries of EU citizens concerned for their future here. Treated as pawns, they have been left with no certainty about their position post-Brexit. People who have contributed to our communities, paid their taxes, made society better, and built lives and futures here have been dispossessed by a Government who seem determined to fight Agincourt again.

Three million people who—like the Windrush generation—live, work, study, pay taxes and contribute to society here have had their lives thrown into question. EU citizens have been packing up and leaving ahead of Brexit: shutting down businesses, resigning from the NHS and leaving their research labs and universities. That damages Scotland. We need the people who will help run our services, build businesses, support our academic sector and build our future. People who come to share Scotland are as welcome as they are necessary, and we need them.

The Government's attitude is disgraceful. They have targets for deporting immigrants. Imagine that: those are not targets as in, "This person or those people should not be allowed to stay", but targets as in, "8,337 a year". What could possibly be the driver of that, other than racism, a sense of exceptionalism and an attitude that we are somehow better than others?

Simon Hoare: I fear that the hon. Lady is falling into the trap I alluded to in my speech of conflating "legal" and "illegal". I think most people in this country, including legal migrants, would say that any Government has a duty and responsibility to ensure that everybody who is here is here legally. If that means setting targets to remove people who should not be here, most people support that, irrespective of their national heritage.

Deidre Brock: I am afraid I cannot agree with the hon. Gentleman on that point. Right hon. and hon Members have made comments about Gypsy Travellers in debates here that have caused my mouth literally to drop open in astonishment and horror. There has been case after case in my constituency office of the most appalling treatment of EU and non-EU nationals alike by UK

Visas and Immigration and the Home Office. My contention is that those attitudes come from successive UK Governments' attitudes towards the issue of immigration as a whole.

Successive UK Governments have created an atmosphere of mistrust and fear, and they are proud of it—the Prime Minister even praises the "hostile environment". They thought that they had tapped into a source of votes by painting immigrants as some kind of threat to an imaginary British way of life. Now Windrush is blowing up the dust of the UK's imperial past. People who came to these islands as British citizens are being deported. People who came here half a century ago are being told to go home. The vans may be gone, but the attitude has not. They are being told to go back to countries they would not recognise now. Their children and grandchildren are also targeted—people who were born in the UK and have never lived anywhere else. Some have already been deported, some have declared themselves stateless to avoid deportation and many more are living in fear that their lives are about to be utterly broken. These people came here when there were labour shortages. They worked, paid their taxes and built lives and communities. They had children who worked, paid their taxes and built on that legacy. They have grandchildren who are doing the same.

The UK is unlikely to change any time soon, but Scotland needs immigrants—we need population growth, and we need the energy and the impetus that comes with them. Our country is damaged by the right-wing xenophobia of deportation, document checks and fear-mongering. EU citizens and Windrush people should not be discouraged or deterred; they should be welcomed and encouraged. This debate is less than it should be—it should be an in-depth and unflinching analysis of the continuing racism of the body politic here. That is our shame and our disgrace, and we should not be content to hand it on to future generations.

6.4 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am sorry I was not here for the beginning of the debate. I was taking part in questions in the Chamber, where a statement had been asked for. May I say to my brother, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), that I was honoured to be at his wedding? I have to declare that I stand as godfather to the aunt of his children. I am also proud to have known Sam King. Along with Arthur Torrington, he got the Windrush Foundation and the Equiano Society going 21 years ago. I may be fortunate that the people I know whom I would regard as being of the Windrush generation—I use that as a way of embracing a large number of people—have been bishops in my church and headteachers in my schools, and have held every kind of job across the spectrum of our society.

What we have found in this debate is too many people saying, "The other side did not get things right." What we have lost is a sense of what each of us can do to try to ensure that we do get it right. Some of the lessons I have learned have come from a book by Will Somerville called "Immigration under New Labour", published by Policy Press at the University of Bristol. It covers 1997 to 2007, so it is not the full period, but in chapters 16, 17 and 18 there is quite a lot of talk about targets. In the days when I served as a junior Minister and my wife

served as a more senior Minister, people laughed at us because we would have between three and 11 boxes over a weekend. Various people said, "Why do you read what is put in front of you?" The answer is that we can find that voice among the public officials or the outsiders who say, "Please look at this. It is not sensible. It is not right."

I was going to appear on "Newsnight" a few days ago, but I got bounced because the subject of the Windrush generation was seen as less important than the future retirement of the manager of Arsenal football club. To some people that may be the right sense of priorities, but it cost me an opportunity to talk about the many people affected by the way the system has worked—albeit for a minority, but that minority matters just as much as the majority. As most people now say, we should not be saying to people who have lived here at peace, paid taxes, registered to vote and contributed as British nationals, "You have to prove what you were doing for elements of your life for each year for the past 40 years." I could not do that; why should they have to do it?

The presumption ought to be that if someone has obviously lived here for long enough to qualify as a recognised British national—as a subject, a citizen—they should not have to go find all these documents. We should say, "This person has been on the electoral register for the past 15 years. It is clear that they came out of a school. Here they are in a confirmation class. Here they are in Guides or Scouts. Here they are at a college or university, or in a recognised training situation, or even just as a taxpayer."

The Inland Revenue knows who has been paying taxes. The Department for Work and Pensions knows who has been paying national insurance. If, on the face of it, that shows they have absolutely no chance of being an illegal immigrant who has come in during the past two or three years, they should be granted British citizenship formally, recognising what is formally right anyway.

I do not want to criticise the media, because we rely on them, but what on earth was that nonsense about the landing cards? British subjects did not complete landing cards. They did not do it. The fact that the landing cards were or might have been destroyed is irrelevant. That should have been obvious to anyone doing work experience at a newspaper, let alone someone working in one of our great news organisations, the Press Association or the BBC.

Emma Reynolds *rose—*

Siobhain McDonagh *rose—*

Sir Peter Bottomley: The hon. Ladies can sort out between themselves who I am giving way to.

Emma Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman says the landing cards are irrelevant, but my constituent Paulette Wilson was sent a letter from the Home Office out of the blue in 2015. It told her that there was no evidence of her entry to the UK, despite the fact that it had destroyed that evidence.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I give way again.

Siobhain McDonagh: In the cases of Trevor, Ken and Neville, if they had had those landing cards, that would have been proof of their entry.

Sir Peter Bottomley: First, I do not know when landing cards came in. If someone arrived on the Empire Windrush in 1948 or on a ship in the next 15 or 20 years, I do not think there were landing cards. Secondly, if they were British, would they have been asked to fill in a landing card, even if they had arrived by air? I think the answer is no.

I campaigned for Krishna Maharaj, who spent 31 years wrongly imprisoned in Florida. He is British. He was born in Trinidad, but being born in Trinidad made him British, and British people do not fill in landing cards. We allow distractions to take away from the common-sense point: what on earth are we doing thinking that the landing cards would solve the problem? Even the manifests do not solve the nationality problem. When people came here, especially from the Caribbean, after the war, they were British until our laws started to change. But we are not talking about that generation; we are talking about the generation of the Sam Kings, the Arthur Torringtons and the like, who also wrote about the contribution that the people from the Caribbean made before 1948 as well as during 1948 and afterwards.

For those who want to know where targets came from, they were not new in 2010 or in 2015. They are discussed in the Will Somerville book, "Immigration under New Labour", and I have no doubt they were probably there before new Labour as well. What we should say to those who are undocumented British nationals, subjects, citizens, is, "How soon and how easily can we give you the documents you need?" We are not talking about someone who says they are 17 when they are actually 23 and have sadly had to come across the Mediterranean from Syria or from another country in the past two or three years. We are talking about people who, just by looking at them, I can tell have been around for almost as long as I have, or as long as my children have, which is still quite some time. We should say, "Let's get you documented in the easiest, fastest, simplest and fairest way possible."

Those advising Ministers, whether inside a Department or outside, should always say to a Minister, "Is this fair? Is it right? Will it work?" I look to this man here, my brother, the right hon. Member for Tottenham. If we sat together for three quarters of an hour I could probably solve much of this and take away the anxiety. We could apologise for the distress that has been wrongly caused to too many for too long, but the fact is common sense normally works. Let us apply it.

6.11 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I want to thank Patrick Vernon, originally from Wolverhampton—all the best people are—for setting up the petition, and I want to say a huge thank you to the 178,000 people who signed it. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for his powerful advocacy and his incredible work and determination to seek justice for the Windrush generation.

Finally, I want to add my thanks to those of my colleagues to thank all those British people of the Windrush generation—whether they have the documents to say that they are British or not, they are British—for

[Emma Reynolds]

coming here in the post-war period and helping to rebuild Britain. My right hon. Friend was right to say that the way they have been treated is a national disgrace.

I want to talk specifically about my constituent, Paulette Wilson, one of the Windrush generation who has been treated by the Government in the most appalling and inhumane manner. We know that the Home Secretary resigned last night, but in my view that is not the end of the matter. The Government still have serious questions to answer about the way Paulette and others have been treated. Also, they have questions to answer about how we avoid that happening in future to the Windrush generation and other Commonwealth citizens, but also to EU citizens way into the future.

I still think that the Prime Minister has serious questions to answer about a raft of policies that she introduced as Home Secretary to create a hostile environment and to create the conditions for this awful scandal. Not only do we have to deal with tackling the injustice of the way the Windrush generation has been treated, but we have to look at the policies, too, and the Government need to change some of them.

My constituent, Paulette Wilson, came to the UK from Jamaica in 1968 at the age of 10. She has worked in the UK all her life and has never left the country. She even worked here in Parliament, serving and waiting on MPs in Commons restaurants. She received a letter from the Home Office out of the blue in August 2015. To her dismay, it accused her of having no evidence of being here legally and having no evidence of her entry to the UK. She started having to report to the immigration centre in Solihull. Two years later, despite the fact that she had gathered substantial evidence of her 50 years in the UK, including 34 years of paying national insurance and the fact that she has a grown-up daughter and a granddaughter, she was detained during one of her visits to the immigration centre.

Paulette spent a week in Yarl's Wood, fearful of what was going to happen next. She became even more scared when she was taken to the detention centre at Heathrow. Let us imagine for a minute what it was like for her. Imagine ourselves in her shoes: you have lived and worked in the UK for 50 years and raised a family. You feel, and you are, British. You have not left the UK in all that time and you suddenly find yourself in a detention centre at Heathrow airport being told you are going to be put on a flight to Jamaica.

Paulette could hear planes taking off and she really thought she was going to be put on a plane. I intervened and so did the Refugee and Migrant Centre in Wolverhampton. Her family—reluctantly, because they are a private family—contacted the media. Paulette was released at the eleventh hour. I want to thank the Refugee and Migrant Centre and the journalist Amelia Gentleman for helping Paulette and her family. But that experience has stayed with Paulette. In the weeks after she was detained, she talked about struggling to eat and sleep. Despite repeated demands for an explanation, we still do not know why she was sent to the detention centre and detained at Yarl's Wood.

I have some questions for the Immigration Minister. She might not be able to answer them today, but I would like some clarification. Why were we never given an explanation as to why Paulette was detained? Why did

the Home Office not consider 34 years of national insurance contributions? Why did it not check with the Department for Work and Pensions? The family provided other evidence of Paulette's decades of living in the UK. Why was that disregarded and disbelieved?

The Prime Minister was in Wolverhampton last week and apologised to Paulette through the *Express & Star*, which is welcome, but why has the Prime Minister, or any other Minister, not apologised to Paulette directly? More broadly, why did it take an initial refusal by Downing Street to meet the Commonwealth Heads of State, the action of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham and the many articles written by Amelia Gentleman for this national scandal to come to light? I have known about this matter for months; other Members have known about it for years. I do not understand why it took so long for us to realise that there was a severe and cruel injustice being meted out by the Government.

In January, I asked the Government a written parliamentary question on how many Commonwealth citizens legally resident in the UK had been detained and deported, and would the Government apologise in those cases? The Immigration Minister, who is here today, which I welcome, said it would be too costly to give the numbers. However, the Government have since committed to doing that, so when can we expect to have those numbers? Will the Minister and the new Home Secretary undertake to write to those who have been mistreated to give them an apology? When can we expect the compensation scheme to be in place? Will the Government consider putting in place legal aid for those willing to come forward?

I have been troubled by a briefing I received—other Members will have had the same briefing—from the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants. The departing Home Secretary said in the House recently that she could guarantee there would be no future enforcement action against the Windrush generation if they made themselves known to the new taskforce. However, according to the briefing document that I have, the head of the taskforce told the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants that referrals to immigration enforcement would be made case by case. Will the Minister clarify that, because it is still not clear what the Government expect in terms of documentation from people of that generation who come forward? We cannot blame them for being fearful of coming forward, given what has happened to my constituent and many others.

The focus of the past few days, and particularly yesterday evening, was what the departing Home Secretary knew about local or regional targets, and whether she—unknowingly or not—misled Parliament. She said that she did not knowingly mislead Parliament, but in a way, that is now an irrelevance. I want to know why there are regional targets for removal. Why are the Government treating people as numbers, not human beings? What will be done about the targets? Are the Government going to get rid of them?

It is a terrible irony that the Government destroy landing cards and then accuse my constituent and others of not having evidence of their entry to the UK. It is a terrible irony that the Government collect taxes and national insurance contributions, but disbelieve individuals when they produce that evidence—I do not know why the Government cannot look for it themselves. It is a terrible irony that the departing Home Secretary is

apparently not on top of her paperwork, but the Government accuse my constituent and others of not having their paperwork in order to prove their status.

The Home Office seems systematically to distrust and disbelieve people, and now it is asking the Windrush generation, who perhaps do not have the paperwork they need, to trust that the Government will believe them. It is not a surprise that that generation still feel betrayed, and still feel distrustful of the Government.

The Government need to get a grip on the situation very quickly. They still need to explain what went wrong and why it took so long for the scandal to come to light. I would like personal apologies to everybody who has been mistreated, including my constituent, and the compensation scheme needs to be dealt with properly and urgently. On top of all that, the Government need to look at their policy. They need to get rid of the removal targets and start treating people as human beings, not numbers.

6.22 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I, too, thank the campaigner Patrick Vernon for pulling together and launching the petition, and my right hon. Friends the Members for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) for their work in Parliament challenging the Government's handling of the Windrush scandal. They speak with great power and authenticity. I also want to put on record how proud I am that my constituency secured the third-highest number of signatories to the petition.

I will briefly quote the writer Caryl Phillips, who was born in Leeds and writes very movingly on a number of topics, including the Windrush generation. In his text "Higher Ground" he said:

"I am grateful, and would thank the Gods...that I have finally mastered this art of forgetting—of murdering the memory."

He is probably talking about slavery and a number of other things there, but it is very relevant to today's debate. I challenge us, as a Parliament, not to murder the memory of the Commonwealth and, in particular, of the Windrush generation.

I have permission to mention a couple of constituency cases. One of my constituents came to the United Kingdom with her parents in 1964 when she was a year old. Her representatives were eventually able to use medical records to persuade the Home Office that she had been here continuously since before 1 January 1973 and was settled at that time, and therefore has indefinite leave to remain. The Passport Office, however, has not accepted that in relation to her grandchild, and is refusing to issue the grandchild a passport. That is because, according to the Passport Office, the grandchild's mother, who has lived in the United Kingdom continually since her birth in the 1980s, is not a British citizen.

The Passport Office refuses to accept that the grandmother had indefinite leave to remain when her daughter was born. Therefore, she is not a British citizen and neither is her daughter. The Passport Office is now also contemplating withdrawing my constituent's British passport. I would be grateful if the Minister responded—perhaps not today, but in writing if I raise the case with her—specifically about the grandchildren.

As a Commonwealth citizen, I recall that in the old days my grandmother always referred to the UK as "the mother country", and we used to travel on our parents' passports. It is therefore easy to see how such confusions arose. I think we are all saying in today's debate that we need to give people the benefit of the doubt, and the wonderful story from my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) is so moving, in all its complexity.

Even though the debate is not strictly about other Commonwealth citizens, will the Minister touch on those from Cyprus and other areas? Due to the publicity, many other people are starting to ask questions. For example, I met a woman well into her 70s who came to the UK from Cyprus, who is now having to do a citizenship quiz. She has worked as a seamstress in north London for years and years. Given that her daughter represents us on the London borough of Haringey, it seems almost an insult to ask her to do a citizenship quiz at her advanced age.

I hope that this can bring more transparency not just to the way that some people are dealt with, but to others who are affected. On Friday, I had another woman come to see me in tears. Her job in another local authority has been outsourced to a large company that has asked her to do a biometric test at the Home Office. She did it, and she does not qualify for thresholds she cannot cross. Yet she showed me the stamp in her passport—she has been in the UK since 1970, with indefinite leave to remain.

Given all the expense that the citizenship process entails, why would that woman think to claim citizenship? I think what upset her was not so much the paperwork—slowly we can resolve those issues with the excellent caseworkers that so many MPs have, myself included—but the fact that for all these years she had felt part of the furniture and part of us, yet now she feels she is other, outside or different, and has a strong sense of not belonging.

We had a hug, and I hope that we can sort this out, but I am not sure that MPs can just provide tea and sympathy. It comes down to a policy response that needs to be more transparent, with equality at its heart. There are not enough MPs, hugs and cups of tea to go around. We need equality and genuine transparency in our system.

I welcome the fact that the outgoing Home Secretary has paid for this with her political career, and the trail probably leads higher than her. Once again, we will not give up. We must continue to ask questions, and we have the wonderful example of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham and others, who have continued to hammer away at this question and to keep alive the flame of equality and not murdering our history. As the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) noted, the new Home Secretary has said

"that could be my mum...my dad...my uncle...it could be me."

I hope—I always try to end my speeches with a sense of hope—that with the new Home Secretary, given his personal experience, we can continue to work together to solve this and to have a genuinely equal society, where we are all the same under this sky.

6.28 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I, too, thank

[Stuart C. McDonald]

the petitioner and the signatories for bringing the debate before the House today, the Petitions Committee for scheduling the debate, and the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for ably introducing it. We have had lots of powerful and thoughtful speeches.

The arrival of 492 passengers onboard the Empire Windrush at Tilbury docks in June 1948 was a pivotal and iconic moment in British history. The pictures and TV footage from the time, which can still be seen on the internet, show people's faces brimming with optimism. These people were legally full citizens of Britain for the first time, thanks to the British Nationality Act 1948, which was aimed at preserving a united Commonwealth.

Despite a labour shortage, which one Government survey estimated at between 600,000 and 1.3 million people, it is fair to say, as hon. Members have pointed out, that the arrival of the first of the Windrush generation was initially neither welcome nor encouraged. An emergency meeting of the Cabinet Economic Policy Committee was called to discuss the situation, and urgent reports sought the ringleaders of the so-called incursion. The Minister of Labour had to reassure MPs that

"no encouragement will be given to others to follow their example."—*[Official Report, 8 June 1948; Vol. 451, c. 1851.]*

As many hon. Members—especially the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy)—have pointed out, despite that less than enthusiastic initial welcome, that generation went on to make a massive contribution to rebuilding the country after the war, enriching it both economically and culturally. If there is one tiny silver lining in this disastrous episode, it is that a light has been cast once again on their extraordinary role in our history. I join other hon. Members in paying tribute to them and thanking them for that.

Fast-forward seven decades, and that tiny silver lining will be of scant comfort to those who have been treated so appallingly by the Home Office. This appalling episode can and should be seen as a not just predictable but inevitable consequence of the UK Government's migration policy. It is not simply a matter of an administrative cock-up. The truth is that the Home Office and the Prime Minister entirely neglected those Commonwealth citizens when they went about ramping up the hostile environment and demanding checks on status at every turn. It seems that little thought was given to the fact that it would often be close to impossible for many Windrush children and others to prove their legal situation. Over time, they were dismissed from jobs they had done for years, they struggled to access NHS treatment and services, and they even faced detention and removal, as we have heard from hon. Members today. Some who went abroad were not allowed to return.

The Home Office knew that this sort of scandal could happen. It is not just that MPs raised individual cases with it: non-governmental organisations, including the outstanding Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, warned it, the high commissioners representing Caribbean countries raised concerns, and, later, its own equality impact assessment for the Immigration Act 2016 flagged up precisely what would happen. It is almost as if the implications for the Windrush generation were seen as little more than unfortunate—they did not require action, never mind the urgent action that was desperately needed.

Quite rightly, there is a widespread public outcry, as the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) described. Parliament is rightly angry, and hon. Members have asked a number of important questions. Given that confidence in the Home Office has been utterly shattered, surely the Government must now provide legal aid for those who believe they may be required to contact the Home Office helpline. Otherwise, many will simply not do so.

Will the Minister discuss with the Ministry of Justice the absolute necessity of providing legal aid? Will she assure us that no one from the Windrush generation is in detention or being asked to report? As the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) asked, will she make it absolutely clear that information from the hotline will not be passed on and used in enforcement action? How broad is the Home Office search for others who have been wrongly detained and removed or not allowed re-entry? What standard of proof does the Home Office require for citizenship or settled status here? What rights will there be to challenge negative Home Office decisions, and what will the compensation scheme look like? Can we have an absolute assurance that Home Office staff are not under pressure to remove or deport individuals, and that there is not a target that incentivises them to ignore or not explore the possible right to be in this country? All those questions require an answer.

A number of hon. Members have rightly said that we have to see this scandal in a broader context, because it is just the tip of the iceberg. The Windrush children are just one of several groups of utterly innocent people who have been treated almost as if they are expendable, while the Prime Minister relentlessly pursues her now widely ridiculed and utterly bogus net migration target. Her policies mean that tens of thousands of children across the UK have been separated from a parent living abroad. Even more couples are kept apart by some of the most draconian, restrictive family migration rules in the world.

The checks that the Prime Minister imposed on landlords in England have pushed landlords and landladies into the role of immigration officers, with the result that the fear of getting it wrong has driven discrimination against prospective tenants who look foreign or have a foreign-sounding name. Despite the fact that the Home Office has been regularly criticised for poor decision making, the Prime Minister has removed in-country rights of appeal, which means that folk have to leave their jobs and families for months on end—sometimes longer—to try somehow to overturn those decisions from abroad. Thousands of innocent students have been arrested and deported, without even getting to see the evidence that the Home Office used to decide their guilt, never mind having the chance to challenge it in a tribunal. At the same time, the Home Office has commissioned a review of the complexity of its immigration rules, yet it insists that they are not complex enough to justify legal aid in England and Wales. Fees for citizenship and passport applications have soared. The list of injustices goes on and on.

Two weeks ago, the then Home Secretary said she was concerned that the Home Office has become too concerned with policy and strategy and sometimes loses sight of the individual. She is right, but that is the fault of Ministers, including the Prime Minister, who have

created policies and strategies that forget the individuals and families whose lives are being destroyed. It is the “computer says no” approach, as the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) aptly described it.

All the while, there is not a shred of evidence that any of this has achieved anything other than division and messed-up lives. Since the Immigration Act 2014 came into force, voluntary returns have actually gone down. Evidence that the Home Affairs Committee received suggests that the hostile environment sometimes actually makes it harder, rather than easier, to enforce immigration rules, because it drives folk into the black private rented market and the black employment market.

There has been some talk today about illegal migrants, as if they are one body of very wicked and evil people whose removal we should celebrate, but they include husbands and wives unable to secure status because of the very strict immigration rules that I described. We heard today that the Home Office is trying to remove somebody who served in Afghanistan—an Afghan national who worked alongside our forces in that country. He is an illegal migrant, too. There are lots of people who came here as children who did not understand that they needed to regularise their status here, and could not even afford to do so. I will come back to that point in a moment.

Before we can go around talking about a hostile environment, we need a system that gets decisions right, that commands public confidence, that has appropriate oversight and systems of appeal, and that has a clear and simple way to determine who is here lawfully and who is not. None of that remotely exists at the moment, so the hostile environment must be reined in urgently. It is essential that MPs from across the House start standing up to the hostile environment and finally put the notorious net migration target out of its miserable existence.

The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) rightly asked what can be done. An early test for Parliament will be the Data Protection Bill and the Home Office’s attempt to help itself to a massive immigration exemption. There is absolutely no doubt that stripping people of their right to know what data the Home Office has about them, and to challenge inaccuracies, will create further burning injustices. As the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East pointed out, we need to prevent a repeat of the Windrush fiasco.

What work has been done to identify other groups—Commonwealth citizens or otherwise—who may be at risk? Let me suggest two things the Government can do. First, tens of thousands of children who were either born in the UK or have lived most of their lives here are undocumented. They are entitled by law to British citizenship if they register, but if they cannot register and become citizens, they face exactly the same issues as the Windrush generation. I cannot see how the Home Office can justify charging more than £1,000 for the privilege of registration. Those children are entitled to British citizenship, and they should not be charged to exercise their rights in this country, any more than the Windrush generation should. That must be put right immediately.

Most obviously and urgently, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) said, we must look after the 3 million and more EU nationals in the UK. The Government must urgently update us about their progress in establishing a system for seeking settled status. Regardless of how successful

that system eventually proves to be, it is very hard to see how, at the end of the grace period, we can avoid there being tens of thousands—probably hundreds of thousands—of people who have not successfully navigated the system to secure a document proving their status. If that happens, it will be Windrush on an even more desperate scale.

Those are the immediate priorities. If Parliament is seriously angry about the hostile environment, it will get down to the business of a root-and-branch review of the Immigration Act 2014 and the Immigration Act 2016. We must indeed start putting in place a system that properly respects people, their human rights and the rule of law. The one we have now too often fails to do so. Windrush is an awful and extreme example, but it is far from the only one.

6.40 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

I, too, have a Commonwealth heritage, and I understand and support every word said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). I thank him for his excellent and impressive work against this injustice. I also thank the petitioner and the 178,000 who signed the petition.

The Prime Minister tried to hide behind the previous Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), but, in reality, she was the architect of these terrible policies and their awful consequences. The previous Home Secretary simply carried on her work. The news coverage of the past few days has been wall to wall on the politics of the resignation of the previous Home Secretary and the appointment of the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid). The petition allows us to recentre the debate on the most important issue: the Home Office’s appalling treatment of the Windrush generation. They are British citizens who have been made homeless, been denied healthcare, lost their jobs, and been detained and potentially deported.

Thanks to *The Guardian*, a number of cases are now well known. We have also heard many cases in today’s debate, such as Paulette Wilson’s. Another case I want to share is that of Sarah O’Connor, who arrived in this country aged six. She worked in a computer shop from age 16 until last October. She lost that job when the benefits agencies challenged her immigration status. Other employers refused to hire her when they realised she had no passport. Only last month when her case received national media attention did the Home Office promise to waive her fee for a biometric card application. As we know, there are many more such cases and, at a Windrush meeting in my constituency, I came across similar heartbreaking cases.

The scandal is wider than the Government want to admit. It includes those who came from other Commonwealth countries, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, many African countries and others. The Migration Observatory estimates that 57,000 such UK citizens from the Commonwealth are directly affected. The scandal also affects children who were brought to this country after 1973, by parents who had arrived here before then. Immigrants who are starting out in a new country cannot always afford to bring their children with them. Although those children did not arrive in the UK before 1973, they are clearly part of the Windrush generation.

[Afzal Khan]

How did this scandal come about? Two words: hostile environment. That was a policy that was supposed to apply to illegal immigrants but, as was predicted, it affected anyone even suspected of being an illegal immigrant. That is exactly what happened to the Windrush generation. In 2014, the Tory-led Government removed protections for Commonwealth citizens who had arrived in this country before 1973. When she was Home Secretary, the Prime Minister brought in the 2016 Immigration Act, which obliges landlords, employers, the NHS and benefits offices to demand written proof of nationality, which many people do not possess. The Government knew that the early arrivals from the Commonwealth—British citizens—did not possess such proofs, but they went ahead anyway.

We have heard many questions from Members in the debate. What needs to happen now? We need answers. How many of the Windrush generation have been deported or detained? How many left voluntarily, under threat of deportation? How many have been refused re-entry after travelling abroad? Will the victims be fully compensated for all costs, all loss of income and services, and distress? Will the helpline report cases for deportation enforcement where it believes people are here illegally? Did the Home Office issue advice to immigration tribunals and judges of the change in the earlier Immigration Act 2014, which removed protections for Commonwealth citizens?

The Government have attempted to introduce red herrings in the debate, but illegal immigration is opposed on all sides, and Labour is in favour of deporting illegal migrants—we have pledged 500 extra Border Force guards to tackle the problem. The Commonwealth citizens who came here legally are still legal. It is only this Government's policies that have treated them in effect as illegal. It is that scandal that the Government have created and should end.

6.45 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and all right hon. and hon. Members across the House who have participated in the debate. They have spoken with passion, knowledge and indeed determination.

As we can clearly see, there is significant public interest in today's debate, and rightly so. I thank members of the public who have attended, as well as all those people—nearly 200,000 of them—who added their name to the petition. The debate was obviously scheduled before the tabling of the urgent question, and I am probably at somewhat of a disadvantage compared with those Members who could be in the main Chamber for at least some of the earlier debate. The message conveyed by the new Secretary of State for the Home Department makes it clear that he is absolutely, personally invested in this issue.

Let us be in no doubt about the debt of gratitude that this country owes to the Windrush generation. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay described in his opening speech, they were invited to come to the United Kingdom immediately after the second world war and in the decades that followed to help us to build modern Britain.

As I said, the new Home Secretary was on his feet in the main Chamber when this debate began. He has rightly made it his clear priority to address Windrush, building on the work of his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), who showed commitment to addressing the issue. It was a pleasure to work with her in the Home Office, and I look forward to supporting the new Home Secretary in continuing that vital work.

I would like to do justice to the comments, questions and individual cases raised by Members this afternoon. All of them are important. Many Members will have noticed that I took copious notes throughout the debate, but I mention first the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) even though, somewhat shamefacedly, I wrote very little about his contribution. That is because I preferred to listen—to his passion and to his determination to convey to me, Members, the public and the Government how strongly he feels that we must right this wrong. We are determined to do so.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who is not in his place, on his tone. In fact, I congratulate all hon. Members who have contributed on their tone. There has been real consideration of the issue and real determination to convey the message to me as powerfully as possible. I therefore wish to start by saying that of course I feel shame and of course I am deeply, deeply sorry.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) raised three cases, highlighting real and personal stories, which were similar to the personal stories that I heard over the weekend when I was in Croydon and in Sheffield with caseworkers who are on the frontline, doing their best to help people through the process. I have to say that I was very impressed with the determination of those caseworkers to be sympathetic and understanding, and to talk people through the process as gently as they possibly could while at the same time enabling them to give their stories and to provide a picture of their life in the UK—helping them through a process with which we should have been helping them much earlier.

We cannot fail to be moved and to be ashamed when confronted with the individual stories, but as a result, be determined to get the wrong righted, to sort the cases out and to make sure that the legal status is confirmed. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) mentioned three cases; we have done a very rapid trawl of those appointments that are already scheduled and I believe that one of those cases will hopefully be resolved tomorrow.

It is important that we as Members convey to our constituents and to the public at large the fact that this process is designed to be constructive and to help. When I first spoke on this issue, I tried to impress on everyone the fact that we needed to have confidence built in the system, so that people would have the courage to come forward. Undoubtedly, the strongest advocates are the people who have been for their interviews and had their status confirmed, who have been willing to speak to the media to confirm that that has happened.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) spoke of the melting pot of Cardiff; I represent part of the city of Southampton, another area that has a very large port. I was very fortunate last Thursday night to go and meet, albeit in the road that crosses the

edge of the constituency, one of my constituents called Don John, who for many decades has been a leader of the Caribbean community in Southampton.

I discussed the issue with him, knowing very well that this weekend, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) was holding an event in her constituency attended by Home Office officials, in order to give confidence to those from Bristol who might be affected that the Home Office is there to help. I said to Don on Thursday night, "Let's see how the event in Bristol goes, but what I can do as a local Member is to make sure that people in Southampton have the opportunity to have an event. I will make sure that there are Home Office officials there." I say that to all Members: where there is a significant community that they think will be affected, let us reach out to communities; let us not be just a reception centre in the various places that we have up and down the country; let's make a real effort to go to communities and make sure that events take place in places that are comfortable for people.

I am the first to acknowledge that there can be barriers to coming and making contact with the Home Office. Working with my right hon. Friend the new Home Secretary, they are barriers that I am determined to beat down, because they should not be there.

Lyn Brown: I am genuinely delighted to hear what the Minister has to say. She is a very competent Minister, but there is an issue of trust. I do not see my communities beating their way to her door, because that trust has been badly damaged.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to talk about trust, which is why I take her comment on the chin. We have a duty to rebuild that trust, and I am determined that we must do so through demonstration and through action, and through an assurance from me and those working on the taskforce that no case will be passed to immigration enforcement. When somebody contacts that helpline, we have absolutely undertaken that none of those details will be passed on to immigration enforcement.

Mr Lammy: The Minister will recognise that the Government still say that there is a burden of proof, although they have lowered it. If there were Windrush generation or Commonwealth people who contacted the Home Office who did not meet that burden, so did not get their status, would they be subject to enforcement? That fear is very real.

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important question. I give that assurance. People may well come forward who cannot not produce the proof. It is imperative, if we are to build trust, that we say, "We will not pass those details to immigration enforcement." The message has to be what I saw on Saturday: we want to be able to help people to build their own story. We want to be able to use whatever disparate pieces of information they may have. A gentleman came to Croydon on Saturday morning who could produce his City & Guilds qualification in horticulture, I believe. That one certificate was pretty much the only evidence that he had of where he had been at school. We have to listen to people and use our own records.

Catherine West: Does the Minister have a view about the legal aid question? In the old days, we all had legal aid centres that people could go to, but they simply do not exist in communities in the way that they did, due to Government reductions. *[Interruption.]* Will she comment on the possibility of legal aid?

Caroline Nokes: I am slightly concerned that there is an outbreak of coughing in the debate.

Catherine West: It's freezing!

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady is right—it is absolutely freezing. I have been shaking throughout the debate, although that may not be due just to the temperature.

That is an interesting question, and we are already working with the Ministry of Justice on a review of legal aid. I do not want people to have to use lawyers; I want them to be able to go through an easy process. I get the message from the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) that we have to build trust, and I am determined to do so.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab)
rose—

Caroline Nokes: I will finish this point. I do not want people to have to incur more stress and cost—we will reimburse them for their legal costs already, as part of the compensation scheme, which I will address.

There is an important aspect here: we are determined to make this easy, by having the most senior and able caseworkers—who we are trying to empower, through a change of culture in the Home Office—to take decisions. We want not the "computer says no" attitude, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset and many others have referred to, but a position where, better than the computer saying yes, the human says yes. That is a real change.

Eleanor Smith: I am one of the second generation of Windrush; my parents came in 1954. I really do not understand why people have to prove that they live in this country when they have children aged 30 or older and probably have grandkids, too. Why are we talking about having to prove it? Why can we not just give them a blanket exception? I do not understand why, if people have entered the country from 1948 onwards, and up to 1974, which is about 45 years ago, the Minister is talking about having to prove that they live in this country. Is that what she is saying?

Caroline Nokes: There is a significant question of deemed leave and processes in 1973 that did not give people a legal document that demonstrated their status. That is the failing that we have to put right. There may well be people out there who do not come forward. We have to work to give people confidence, but also to give them an important document that enables them to go on and get their British citizenship—all at no cost. I do not want anyone to fall foul of this going forward. If we just grant deemed leave again, we may find ourselves in this situation again.

Many Members have mentioned the difference from EU settled status. That is an important and difficult point. Since I came into this job, a great deal of my time

[*Caroline Nokes*]

and energy have been taken up with making sure that the settled status scheme, which we will open later this year, will work. It matters to me that it works digitally and easily, and that, rather than the “computer says no” mentality, we have a default position whereby if people are here, the computer will say yes.

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) asked about whether the app will work on iPhone; we have been working on that for many months. It works on an Android phone, but Apple as yet has not released the update that would enable it to work on iPhones. I recognise that that is a problem. I encourage all right hon. and hon. Members to talk about that, because I cannot force Apple to participate—I wish I could, but I cannot. It is important that, for those EU citizens, many of whom have been here for years just like the Windrush generation, we make the process simple, straightforward and digital.

Afzal Khan: I thank the Minister for the clarification that no case will be passed on for enforcement, but we have seen that this is not simply a question of enforcement. There is the health issue—people are suffering from cancer and dying—and people are becoming homeless or losing jobs. What will she do to help them?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. It is absolutely right to say that the taskforce is prioritising appointments for people in vulnerable positions—those who are out of employment or at risk of falling out of employment, those with health conditions and those with problems with tenancies. There is a significant group of people with whom we must work, but it is right to prioritise people on the basis of need. We are working really hard. In Sheffield, it was great to see call-backs going on, appointments being made and people having conversations.

My right hon. Friend the former Home Secretary made it very clear that we will compensate people for loss, but it is right that we get the compensation scheme right from the outset. Members have raised interesting points about what should be included in that, many of which might seem really self-evident and straightforward—it should cover legal costs, loss of employment and housing, and so on—but there might be other aspects to it. A number of people have talked about counselling for stress and trauma. It is important that we have an independent person who enables and empowers us to get that right from the outset. That will take a little time, but it is important that we have someone independent of the Home Office who is able to engender trust.

John Spellar: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: I will take an intervention from the right hon. Gentleman, even though he has not been here long.

John Spellar: I thank the Minister for the welcome remedial measures she is outlining, which could help to deal with the outcomes, but does she not recognise that this issue comes from deep systemic and cultural problems inside the Home Office? Members of Parliament raised cases and pointed out the flaws in the Home Office’s

arguments, but it utterly refused to reconsider them. This is not just about the computer, or the initial person at the end of the line, saying no; it is about a failure of management then to remedy things. That is why we are having to get into compensation, taskforces and everything else. The Home Office will still have those deep problems. What is she going to do about that?

Caroline Nokes: Unfortunately, the right hon. Gentleman takes me away from the contributions that have been made and towards the—I do not know how to describe it—somewhat drier technical detail provided to me by officials. I am happy to move on to that, but I would like first to respond to the points made by Members who have been here for the whole debate.

I have addressed some important points about settled status for EU citizens and the responsibility for getting that right, but I would like to highlight the history lesson and information provided by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley). He painted a picture of how the Government can use evidence that is already at our disposal. That is really important. We can share data with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Work and Pensions, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs—the list is long. That is exactly what the taskforce is doing. We are trying to lift the burden from individuals and place it on ourselves so that we provide the information and ensure we get it right.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) rightly started by thanking all those from the Windrush generation who have contributed so much. She raised difficult and important questions for me about how we stop this happening again, and she was absolutely right to do so. We have to stop it happening again. We have to ensure that the same cannot happen to future cohorts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) mentioned the Gurkhas—that Nepalese community—who are so numerous at their base in Hampshire, and we must be mindful the whole while that other communities may well be impacted. I have indicated time and again that uppermost in my mind is the truly enormous number of people from the European Union—3.3 million—who are already here. I do not underestimate the scale of that task.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East asked how we can right the wrong done to her constituent, Paulette Wilson. Mrs Wilson absolutely deserves a personal apology. I am not sure that me saying sorry today is adequate. If the hon. Lady would like me to do so, I would be very happy to meet Mrs Wilson. Every one of us was struck by the severe and cruel injustice that was done to her.

The hon. Lady and the Opposition spokesman raised questions about how many people have been affected, how many have been detained and how many may have been subjected to letters asking them to leave the country voluntarily, or potentially even to removal. We are trawling through the Home Office computer system—the caseworker information database, which goes back to 2002—and scrutinising cases very carefully, using both date of birth and nationality information to verify that, as one might expect. I do not wish to get into numbers until I can be confident that they are correct. We have

an absolute duty to ensure that we get that right. To date, we have not found any single individual who has been removed from the country wrongly. However, I wish to ensure that we get it right.

Mr Lammy *rose*—

Catherine West *rose*—

Caroline Nokes: Everybody is leaping to their feet. I will take a final intervention from the right hon. Gentleman, but I have to crack on a bit.

Mr Lammy: There is an important group of people who may not have been removed but who are watching and listening to this debate and communicating with their families in this country. That is the group of people who went back to the Caribbean, most often to attend a funeral, and were not allowed to come back to this country. It is very important that those people have access to the hotline and to compensation—many of them lost their jobs and are still there—and that they are properly tracked and attended to.

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point those people out, and I am very conscious—

Sir Peter Bottomley: Will the Minister give way?

Lyn Brown *rose*—

Catherine West *rose*—

Caroline Nokes: May I conclude my point before more people jump in? The right hon. Gentleman is right to point that issue out. As the former Home Secretary said last week, we will facilitate those people's coming home if they wish to. Of course, we must also ensure that visas are available to those who have settled back in their country of origin or elsewhere, should they wish to come here on a visit or relocate here permanently. That is crucial. It is important that we ensure that we enable that to happen for them.

Sir Peter Bottomley: It may be that the Minister wants to write to the right hon. Member for Tottenham after the debate. Officials may want—not today, but in time—to consider and advise Ministers on checking with airlines. Often, those people went with a valid ticket to an airline desk and were refused boarding by the airline because they might be refused entry to the country. The airlines will almost certainly have a record of that. It would be useful information.

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, which I have made to officials. I was very concerned that people might be turned away at airline desks. We absolutely must not let that happen. Equally, the Border Force in the UK has to understand that this is a generation of people to whom we owe a duty to get things right from this point forward. We cannot allow this dreadful situation to arise again.

Lyn Brown: On the issue of trust, my constituents are concerned that deportations are continuing, despite our debating the issue and despite reassurances from the Minister, the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister.

One of my constituents, Zita, contacted me to ask about flight PVT070, which she tells me is about to go to Jamaica with people on board who are being deported.

Caroline Nokes *indicated dissent.*

Lyn Brown: I would be grateful if the Minister put that shake of the head into words and on the record.

Caroline Nokes: It is absolutely not. We are looking very closely at all our enforcement practices to make sure that nobody can be impacted in this way, and that is crucial.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Caroline Nokes: I hope hon. Members will not object if I move on somewhat. I apologise, but there are some important matters that I must get on the record, and I intend to do so.

I am very clear that there has been a failure by successive Governments to ensure that individuals who arrived before 1973 have the documentation they need. We are putting that right as a matter of urgency. My right hon. Friend the former Home Secretary made a statement to the House last week in which she set out our approach to the Windrush generation, including the compensation scheme, which I have already referred to.

I am a pragmatic politician, and I do not apologise for that. I have always been focused on finding solutions, and that is exactly what we are trying to do now. When we saw Windrush cases emerging, we became focused on the operational side of helping those individuals. As the former Home Secretary said, we were too slow to identify the pattern and recognise it as part of a wider issue. For that, I am very sorry.

I want to make sure that we not only put this right but improve our mechanisms, to ensure that if a similar systemic issue were to arise again, the Home Office would be able to identify and resolve it much more clearly. The new contact centre will be at the centre of that, monitoring trends from incoming calls to understand where the problems are. We will supplement that with insight and customer feedback to UK Visas and Immigration. I was asked whether there would be a time limit, and I can reassure Members that there will not be.

Catherine West: I thank the Minister for being so generous with her time. Will she clarify whether Home Office staff receive a bonus for the number of removals they make?

Caroline Nokes: I am absolutely unaware of any bonus scheme for removals. What I want to focus on today is not removals but making sure, for the Windrush generation, that we get their British citizenship granted as swiftly as we can and at no cost to them.

Yvette Cooper *rose*—

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Lady has sat silently so far—I am surprised.

Yvette Cooper: I have been listening, and I wanted to hear the contributions—I will want to speak in the debate on Wednesday. My hon. Friend's question is

[Yvette Cooper]

important, because I heard rumours that the head of immigration enforcement and senior enforcement officials have had bonuses linked to enforcement performance, including meeting removals targets. I appreciate that the Minister may not know the details right now, but it is really important that she finds some urgent clarity on that. It would be very disturbing to have a target-driven system that rewards people for removals they make, when there are no independent appeals against many removals and enforcement.

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Lady has asked a specific question about bonuses, and I have said on the record I am not aware of any such system of bonuses. However, I will undertake to go away and find out, prior to Wednesday's debate, when I look forward to being able to go over this issue in more detail, with more time, in the main Chamber.

I know, as everyone here and—I believe—everyone in this House knows, that we regard the Windrush generation as being of us and part of us. I believe the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green referred to them as being “part of the furniture”. We regard them as British, but we need to ensure that they have the legal documentation confirming that. Nationality law is incredibly complicated, and I want to ensure that their legal status is cemented as soon as possible. We have made it clear that we wish the process to be simple and that nobody should have to undergo a life in the UK test or attend a citizenship ceremony unless they wish to. Some may, and we would want to make that available to them.

Of course, some may not wish to be British citizens at all. We respect that position, but we still need to confirm their status here—free of charge—as someone able to remain in the UK and access services. This point was made earlier: there will also be people in the Windrush generation who, having worked all their lives in Britain, have retired to the country of their birth but obviously retain strong ties here. We should respect and nurture those ties. Should they wish to come back, we will allow that.

I sympathise with anyone who has found the process difficult, and I would like to assure hon. Members that we are doing everything we can to ensure that it is as smooth as possible. I am pleased that more than 100 people have now been issued with the documentation they sought, but please be assured that I am in no way complacent about that. We will continue to improve the service provided.

Mr Lammy: There is another important point. The Minister will understand that some important Caribbean countries—St Kitts, Antigua, St Lucia and others—got their independence after 1973, and a bunch of people are concerned about the 1973 cut-off. Will she say a little more about the situation for those people, some of whom may have come to this country as British subjects from countries whose independence did not come until later in the 1970s or early 1980s? Antigua's was as late as 1981.

Caroline Nokes: Of course, my right hon. Friend the previous Home Secretary addressed how we solve the status and situation of those who may have come here

between 1973 and 1988. I am aware of this issue, and, going forward, I want to ensure that we have a comprehensive package for those whom I am going to regard as the Windrush children, of whom there are very, very many.

As I have said, I was in Sheffield and Croydon over the weekend, listening to the calls being made and the quality of the conversations going on—they were conversations; they were in no way interrogative. In our process, we have a script that is evolving over time. At the end of every day, the script changes and the lessons that have been learned from those conversations during the day are used to ensure that things are better going forward. It is an evolving, iterative process.

I think I have addressed most of the questions raised. If important aspects have been raised that I have not addressed, I will make them very clear to the House on Wednesday. We are working hard to resolve the situation. The new Home Secretary has made his position, personal investment and commitment very clear, and we are working to ensure that it cannot happen again.

As we have heard, this year is the 70th anniversary of the Empire Windrush arriving at Tilbury docks, which makes the situation all the more poignant and tragic. The Government will be celebrating Windrush day, and in the next few days I will have the opportunity to speak to the new Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about how we can use that occasion to build trust with those we have let down. It is not lost on me that our new Home Secretary has come to the Home Office from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and, of course, he introduced the paper on integration, which is so important going forward. He has a strong ally in the new Secretary of State in his old Department, which I am sure will provide a strong link.

I reassure right hon. and hon. Members that the Government are committed to righting the wrongs for the Windrush generation, to ensuring that those who have the right to be here in the United Kingdom are never treated in such a way again and to restoring trust in the Home Office to deliver the outcome that people deserve. I am proud of the work that has been done over the past fortnight to set us on the right course, and I look forward to working with colleagues and officials in the coming months to accomplish those aims.

7.18 pm

Steve Double: I want first to thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. It has at times been passionate; it has been clear; and there have been excellent contributions from across the House, including many deeply moving personal accounts. I also thank Mr Vernon, and all those who signed the petition that enabled the debate to take place today. We are very grateful and I am delighted that it has been possible to hold the debate, through the Petitions Committee.

There has been great agreement across the House that we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the Windrush generation, and to all those who have come from Commonwealth countries and played such an important role in our nation, and contributed so much, over past decades. There was agreement that wrong has been done to them. I am grateful to the Minister for her clear message that there is no hiding from it—that something has gone dramatically wrong and needs to be put right.

There was also agreement that there are lessons that have to be learned to ensure that where things have gone wrong changes will be made, so that what happened can never be allowed to happen again.

I want, as many Members have done in the debate, to give once again the clear message that we are incredibly grateful to those who have come as part of the Windrush generation, and to others since who have contributed so much to our country. We are sorry about the experience that they have had to go through, and the clear message from this House is that we want them to stay. They belong here and are part of our nation. We want to do

everything we possibly can to make sure they know that they are welcome here. We will do everything we can to resolve the issue, so that they have the documentation they need to feel secure, and to feel they belong here for the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 216539 relating to people who entered the UK as minors between 1948 and 1971.

7.21 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 30 April 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Business Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): I am today publishing a consultation document which sets out a range of proposals to reform the law governing limited partnerships, including Scottish limited partnerships.

The United Kingdom has a global reputation as a great place to do business. People looking to grow or relocate a business come to Britain confident in our high corporate standards. Part of that confidence derives from our strong transparency requirements, which ensure people know who they are doing business with. Transparency also helps combat illicit activity which is a vital underpinning of the UK's business environment, a key theme of the Government's industrial strategy.

The UK is a world leader on corporate transparency and we want to retain this position, so we continue to look for opportunities to improve the transparency and integrity of our legal framework. In response to concerns that limited partnerships might be being misused, we sought and received evidence last year. The evidence demonstrates that the limited partnership, including its Scottish form, continues to fulfil important functions in key sectors of our economy. But it also highlighted that there are ways in which the legal framework governing limited partnerships could be strengthened and updated.

The proposals I am consulting on aim to strike the right balance between maintaining high corporate standards while maintaining the UK's attractiveness as a place to do business and I look forward to hearing from interested parties.

I have placed copies of the consultation document in the Library of the House.

[HCWS656]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Carbon Monoxide Detection and Safety

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): Carbon monoxide which can be released if a boiler or fire is faulty or poorly maintained can be a silent killer.

The Government take the risk and consequences of carbon monoxide poisoning seriously and we have been working closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) on this important life safety issue.

The Government with their agencies continue to raise awareness about the risks. For example, our national fire safety campaign helps fire and rescue services promote carbon monoxide messaging and Gas Safety Week is a national campaign to help raise awareness in homes with gas appliances.

Regulation also has an important role to play. Since 2010, our building regulations have required carbon monoxide alarms when solid fuel appliances are installed and in 2015 we introduced further regulation to require alarms when homes that have a solid fuel appliance are privately rented. The Government have consulted recently on the effectiveness of the regulations in the private rented sector.

As a result of our actions, the number of carbon monoxide poisonings has fallen and incidents are thankfully rare but we cannot be complacent.

In recent years there have been improvements in carbon monoxide alarms and the cost has fallen and Government think it is now right to look at the requirements for carbon monoxide alarms generally to see whether they need to be strengthened.

The Government are therefore launching a review of the requirements and the evidence base which underpins these with a view to consulting by the end of the year. Any future changes in requirements would take account of the outcome of the Government's consultation on the operation of private rented alarm regulations and the Dame Judith Hackitt independent review into building regulations and fire safety.

[HCWS657]

JUSTICE

Justice Update

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): On 9 January, I announced an immediate review into: the transparency of Parole Board decision making; whether there should be a mechanism to allow parole decisions to be reconsidered; and victim involvement in the parole process. On Saturday I published the full findings of that review and the action I will take in response.

The review has looked at issues with the parole process as a whole following the Parole Board's decision to direct the release of John Worboys. Under the current law, the policies and procedures of the Parole Board mean decisions are taken behind closed doors. Open justice is an important principle of our justice system. It must not only be done; justice must be seen to be done.

Victims, and the public, must have confidence in the criminal justice system. Parole Board decisions are inevitably difficult, but this makes it even more important that information is available about how the process works. We must support victims as they continue to suffer from the impacts of the crimes committed against them, and make sure they receive timely and accurate information about what is happening in their case, delivered in a considerate way.

This review sets out the action the Government will take. We are:

removing the blanket prohibition on the disclosure of information about Parole Board proceedings, so that victims can be given summaries of the reasons for the board's decisions. Where the Parole Board chair considers it to be in the public interest, summaries will also be available to the public and the media on request. There will be a presumption that this will happen. This change will come into force on 22 May 2018;

launching a consultation on a new process to allow reconsideration of Parole Board decisions on whether to release a prisoner. We envisage a judge-led reconsideration process which in some circumstances could be open to the public, and with the individual or panel that makes the reconsideration decision named. This consultation will consider how the new process should operate and will be open until the end of July. Once that has completed I will set out my plans for bringing the changes into effect; and,

making immediate changes to how we communicate with victims. We are widening access to the Victim Contact scheme and considering further changes to be included in the Victims' strategy which we will publish this summer.

In addition to the immediate actions I am taking forward as a result of the review, I have also announced a comprehensive examination of all 27 of the Parole Board rules to ensure that the processes and procedures as a whole are right and fair.

This initial package of measures sets out the immediate action we are taking. It is a vital first step in moving toward a parole system that ensures greater openness, challenge and involvement of victims in the parole process, and towards restoring the confidence of victims and the wider public in the justice system.

[HCWS655]

Petition

Monday 30 April 2018

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Accessibility in Chinley station

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Chinley station on the mainline between Manchester Piccadilly and Sheffield is inaccessible as the only access to the platforms are via steep steps; further that Chinley station is situated at the heart of a growing commuter village which acts as the gateway to the Peak District; and further that members of the Chinley and Buxworth Transport Group have continued to campaign for further improvements, as transport should be accessible for everyone.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Transport to make improvements to Chinley station so that the public can have level access to the railway at Chinley.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Ruth George, Official Report*, 12 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 682.]

[P002117]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani):

I recognise the importance of improving accessibility at rail stations as part of the whole journey experience. Much of our station infrastructure is Victorian and is therefore not accessible to many disabled passengers, which is why we have invested in improving accessibility of our railway through the Access for All programme.

For previous rounds of funding, stations were selected based on their annual footfall, weighted by the incidence of disability in the area. We also took into account the priorities of the industry, the availability of third party funding and local factors such as proximity to a hospital, together with consideration of geographic spread across the rail network.

In the last round of funding the Train Operating Company, Northern, did not nominate Chinley station. All of the Access for All funding has now been allocated to projects until spring 2019, but we will be making further funding available for rail accessibility in the next control period (2019-24). We will be announcing further details of how funds will be allocated later this year, but it is likely that the criteria used to select stations will be broadly similar to the process used for earlier tranches of the programme.

For schemes such as Chinley to be considered for future funding, it is likely that they will also need strong industry support and ideally a proportion of match funding to help weight the business case.

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