

**Wednesday  
16 May 2018**

**Volume 641  
No. 140**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 16 May 2018**

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# House of Commons

Wednesday 16 May 2018

*The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### CABINET OFFICE

*The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—*

#### Government Procurement: Small Businesses

1. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the use of small businesses in Government procurement. [905315]

3. **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to enable a wider range of businesses to bid for and secure public sector contracts. [905317]

11. **Craig Mackinlay** (South Thanet) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the use of small businesses in Government procurement. [905327]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden):** Small businesses are the engine of our economy, and we are determined to level the playing field so that they can win their fair share of Government contracts. That is why, last month, I announced a range of new measures, including consulting on excluding bids for major contracts from suppliers who fail to pay their subcontractors on time and giving subcontractors greater access to buying authorities to report poor payment performance.

**Mark Pawsey:** I thank the Minister for his answer, but I recently met small businesses at the Rugby branch of Coventry and Warwickshire chamber of commerce, many of whom told me that they were put off from tendering for public sector contracts by the complexity of the process. I know that Ministers have worked hard to break down barriers, so what steps is he taking to get the message across that there are real opportunities for business among small companies?

**Oliver Dowden:** My hon. Friend raises a very important point. As he says, we have already removed complex pre-qualification questionnaires from low-value contracts, but this afternoon I will again be meeting the small business panel, which represents small businesses up and down the country, and we will be discussing exactly how we can further simplify pre-qualification questionnaires and associated bureaucracy.

**Priti Patel:** The UK's fantastic small and medium-sized enterprises drive innovation and help to deliver our public services. What barriers has the Minister identified that he will tackle to ensure that we can see more small businesses from around the country tender for Government contracts?

**Oliver Dowden:** I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. She is absolutely right: I am committed to breaking down barriers for SMEs supplying the public sector. That is why, over Easter, I announced that we required significant contractors to advertise their contracting opportunities for SMEs on Contracts Finder. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has appointed an SME champion in each Department, and I have personally written to strategic suppliers to remind them of their obligation to pay subcontractors on time.

**Craig Mackinlay:** A report that I published in conjunction with the TaxPayers Alliance earlier this year found that some public sector organisations are spending up to seven times more for a ream of photocopier paper than others. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that the public sector spends taxpayers' money more wisely in everything that they incur and spend, and will he undertake to read my report?

**Oliver Dowden:** I will, of course, undertake to read my hon. Friend's report and will respond directly. It is precisely for this reason of getting good value for the taxpayer that we established the Crown Commercial Service to increase savings for the taxpayer by centralising buying requirements for common goods and services such as photocopier paper.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): FCC Environment has public sector contracts across 160 constituencies, yet it refuses to pay its workers sick pay. The workers in Hull have been out on strike for more than 30 days after one of their colleagues developed cancer and had to return to work after a month because he could not afford to be off work. Will the Minister please look at reforming the rules for procurement so that no companies can exploit workers in this way and not pay them the basic right of sick pay?

**Oliver Dowden:** Clearly, all suppliers are subject to the general law of the land, which covers many of those points. In addition, we have introduced a supplier code of conduct, which looks exactly at those corporate responsibility points, and we review it continuously, and we will review it with such cases in mind.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): Today's Carillion report clearly demonstrates the urgent need to deal with the late payment culture in the construction industry, which is hitting many subcontractors. Most important and pressing for me today, four months after the Carillion collapse, is the ongoing shutdown of the Midland Metropolitan Hospital. I have raised the matter with the Cabinet Office several times, with Health Ministers, and even twice here in the Chamber with the Prime Minister, so when will the Government stop dithering and start work again on this much-needed hospital?

**Oliver Dowden:** I know that the right hon. Gentleman is very passionate about this issue. I can reassure him, rightly again, that we remain absolutely committed to

getting the new hospital built as quickly as possible, and we are supporting the trust to achieve that while ensuring that taxpayers' money is spent appropriately.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): Although we warmly welcome moves to open up Government contracts to SMEs, the fact is that they are still being crowded out by big suppliers that regularly fail to deliver, including G4S with its youth custody provision; Capita with its failing Army recruitment contract, among many others; and, of course, Carillion. Will the Government introduce a new requirement that firms cannot bid for new Government contracts while they are still failing to meet quality standards on their existing public sector jobs?

**Oliver Dowden**: Individual contracting Departments clearly keep the performance of all contractors under review. The hon. Gentleman says that we should ensure that small businesses can bid for Government contracts. I announced a range of measures over Easter precisely to deal with that issue. Indeed, we have introduced a requirement for all subcontracting opportunities by principal contractors to be advertised on the Contracts Finder website, which gives SMEs a great chance to bid for work.

### House of Lords Reform

2. **Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of the recommendations of the report of the Lord Speaker's Committee on the size of the House of Lords. [905316]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith)**: On 20 February, the Prime Minister wrote to the Lord Speaker to respond to the Committee's recommendations. The Prime Minister has committed to do her bit to reduce the size of the House of Lords by continuing the restrained approach to appointments that she has taken so far.

**Neil Gray**: Is not it even a tad embarrassing for the Minister that while their lordships have come forward with proposals for reforms of the outdated and bloated House of Lords, this Government propose to do nothing to reform it?

**Chloe Smith**: No. We made it clear in our manifesto that reform of the House of Lords was not a priority.

**Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Ind): Does the Minister agree that the size of the House of Lords now makes it ungainly, that it is politically unbalanced and that it has become democratically very detached? Is not it time that we looked in more general terms at the future of the House of Lords?

**Chloe Smith**: The key point is that we do expect the House of Lords to do a good job, but we also expect the House of Commons to be prime and to be able to do its job.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Does the Minister realise that her Government's refusal to reform the upper Chamber combined with the provisions of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill mean that, for

the first time ever, the unelected House of Lords will have more power over devolved matters in Scotland than the elected Scottish Government. As a democrat, how can she justify this outrageous situation?

**Chloe Smith**: I have two points. First, I am actually very pleased and grateful to the House of Lords for the consideration that it has given to the EU withdrawal Bill. It has provided important scrutiny, in particular of the devolution clauses for which I and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster are responsible. Secondly, I think that many Members of this House would agree that there are many fine representatives of the Scottish people in this very Chamber who do a very fine job, and I welcome them to their places.

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): Although constitutional reform is important, will the Minister ensure that the Government remain focused on delivering the services that the British people need?

**Chloe Smith**: My hon. Friend has it exactly right. There are many more important issues in the minds of the electorate. These issues were of course discussed at length during the last general election, when, as I have said, our manifesto was very clear that we did not think that reform of the House of Lords was a pressing priority.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): In any discussions that the Minister may have with the Lord Speaker's Committee, would she be able to impress on its members the need to ensure that the will of the people of the United Kingdom in leaving the EU ought to be uppermost in the minds of the lords and that they overlook that at their peril?

**Chloe Smith**: This sits with the theme to which I already alluded, which is that we think that the House of Commons should have rightful primacy. Indeed, that is where we see elected representatives of the British population who are able to carry forward—in the instance to which the hon. Gentleman refers—the will of the British people in leaving the European Union.

### UK Constitutional Integrity

4. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps he is taking to preserve the integrity of the UK. [905318]

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington)**: The constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom is vital to the security and prosperity of all four nations. That is why the EU (Withdrawal) Bill respects devolution, while allowing common approaches to be maintained to secure the common market of the United Kingdom.

**Fiona Bruce**: Yesterday the Scottish National party's Brexit Minister said:

"There is no such thing as a single market in the UK."

Does the Minister agree?

**Mr Lidington**: Mr Russell has always been perfectly constructive and sensible in his approach to negotiations, and I am obviously disappointed that so far the Scottish

Government have not felt able to join the Welsh Government in agreeing to the sensible compromise that is on the table. What has been made very clear to me by Scottish businesses, however, is that the UK common market matters a great deal to their prosperity.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that we can have integrity and maintain integrity as well as having access to this vital £600 million market? Is he further aware that a small businessman in my constituency, after hearing him on the Radio 4 “Today” programme, phoned me and said “I feel suicidal.”?

**Mr Lidington:** I am sorry if constituents feel that way after talking to the hon. Gentleman. The important point about small businesses is that they need to be able to sell freely to customers and to get supplies from contractors in all parts of the United Kingdom freely without erecting new internal trade barriers within our kingdom. That is what the EU withdrawal Bill makes possible.

**Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that UK-wide frameworks are good for business and good for jobs? Does he share my regret that Nicola Sturgeon wants to damage the integrity of the UK?

**Mr Lidington:** Constitutionally, nationalist politicians are quite entitled to pursue their political objectives. The Government’s responsibility is to ensure that Scottish businesses and Scottish consumers are protected and that they do not risk extra burdens or higher prices as a result of obstruction in the UK internal market.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Conservatives are isolated in the Scottish Parliament, as five parties voted—*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Linden, I have high hopes of your prospects of statesmanship in due course, which are not aided by you waving an Order Paper in an eccentric manner. *[Interruption.]* Order. The same goes for Scottish Conservative Members. Mr Kerr, you are a most amiable individual, but you do tend to become very over-excitable. Calm yourself, man, calm yourself.

**Patrick Grady:** Last night, four out of five parties in the Scottish Parliament voted by an overwhelming majority to withhold legislative consent for the EU withdrawal Bill. How would this Government, in ignoring the decision of the democratically Scottish Parliament, preserve the integrity of the United Kingdom?

**Mr Lidington:** I have been very heartened by the degree of cross-party support in the Welsh Assembly and in the House of Lords for the sensible compromise that the Government have put on the table. As I have said repeatedly to Scottish Ministers, my door remains open to consider any practical proposal they want to bring forward, even at this stage, but I would urge the Scottish Government to think again.

## Cyber-security

5. **Richard Benyon** (Newbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help improve the cyber-security of public and private sector organisations. [905319]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden):** Our world-leading national cyber-security strategy is supported by £1.9 billion-worth of investment. It sets out measures to defend our people, businesses and assets, to deter our adversaries and to develop the skills and capabilities we need.

**Richard Benyon:** With cyber-attacks on public services in other countries and a highly publicised attack on our own NHS, does my hon. Friend agree that cyber-security is not just the responsibility of people at the top of our businesses, public services and agencies, but is actually the responsibility of every single employee, and that we have to get that culture across our public service estate?

**Oliver Dowden:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Cyber-security is a responsibility of all businesses and individuals. It is precisely the objective of the Government’s national cyber-security strategy to get that point across.

**Laura Smith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is undeniable that the UK is in the grip of a digital skills gap, yet despite the Government’s national cyber-security programme, the problem is getting worse. Fewer students are taking up technology-based A-levels, and those who do are underperforming compared with their counterparts in other subjects. What conversations has the Minister had with his Front-Bench colleagues to ensure that digital technology is integrated across the curriculum and that teachers of all subjects are given the training to help them inspire the next generation into closing the digital skills gap?

**Oliver Dowden:** I do not recognise the picture that the hon. Lady paints. We are a world leader in digital technology, as I repeatedly see when I visit the Government Digital Service, which has an extensive training programme. In addition, one of the first three of the Government’s new T-levels will focus on digital.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) has just sent me a most gracious letter of apology in respect of a matter for which he has no reason whatsoever to apologise. I think we ought to hear the fella.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I received a letter last week from Greater Manchester police that informed me that on 18 April I was involved in a vehicle collision in Salford and that, if I am convicted, I will face a fine of £1,000 and get six points on my licence. As many Members will testify, I was in this place on 18 April. This is a clear example of identity theft. Greater Manchester police have been most helpful and told me that it is likely that a drug dealer in Manchester has stolen my identity. You will be interested to know, Mr Speaker, that he has put down my occupation as “cobbler”. I would be interested to know what the Minister has to say.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman has got his point on the record with considerable alacrity.

**Oliver Dowden:** The hon. Gentleman's profession should have been orator and statesman; that would have been a better description. He is absolutely right that we should be working with the police, and that is why one of the measures in our strategy is to deter and disrupt our adversaries, which includes states, criminals and hacktivists.

### Public Life: Intimidation

6. **Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of intimidation faced by people in public life. [905320]

**The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis):** The trend of increased intimidation can seriously damage our democracy. That is why we will be consulting on recommendations made by the Committee on Standards in Public Life to undertake legislative changes, for example, to remove candidates' addresses from ballot papers and create an electoral offence of intimidating candidates. An electoral offence will reflect our view that elections and candidates need to be better protected.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. He will be aware of incidents designed to intimidate people from being involved in public life, including a recent incident where a brick was thrown through a Conservative candidate's window in Liverpool. Does he agree that it is vital that all involved in public life seek to encourage a culture of respect and tackle those who seek to intimidate people?

**Brandon Lewis:** Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a very good point. That was a shocking incident, which I hope all of us on both sides of the House would find abhorrent. The candidate had her one-year-old daughter in the room when the brick was thrown. That is a salutary lesson to us all. Such conduct deters people from participating in politics. That is why we have to look at removing the requirement on local addresses, but we also need leadership from the top. That is why we have introduced a respect code, which I hope the Labour party will eventually follow.

**Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): People who intimidate those in public life are thugs, wherever they are on the political spectrum. Can the Minister tell us what he proposes to do about the *Daily Mail* calling several of his colleagues "traitors" when they spoke up with their views on Brexit?

**Brandon Lewis:** As I have said in the House in the past, we should all be prepared to have good, strong and robust debate, but it should and must be done with respect.

**Mr Speaker:** In a single sentence, David Evennett.

**David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that the increasing intolerance and intimidation of people who put themselves forward for public office is deterring many people from doing so?

**Brandon Lewis:** My right hon. Friend has great experience, and he is absolutely right that we have to crack down on that kind of behaviour and make it clear that we must allow debate with respect, so that people want to and feel confident to get involved in politics. I just hope the Labour party will get its house in order and bring in a respect code as well.

### Voter Registration

7. **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that people with no fixed address are able to vote. [905321]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith):** People with no fixed address can register to vote at an address or place where they spend a large part of their time. The Government have and will continue to work with homelessness charities to make sure that the paperwork required to register without a fixed address can be easily accessed.

**Kate Green:** The voter ID pilots in the recent local elections required people to produce a passport, bus pass or utility bill with their address on it—you will see the irony, Mr Speaker. How likely is it that someone of no fixed abode could produce those documents, and what will the Government do to avoid their disenfranchisement?

**Chloe Smith:** The hon. Lady raises an important point. We had those pilots just a few weeks ago, and I look forward to a full evaluation of their impact. We believe they have been successful and that very few people were negatively affected by them. I look forward to working with the Electoral Commission on the next steps.

**Chris Skidmore** (Kingswood) (Con): People with no fixed address can register to vote through a "declaration of local connection" form. Will the Minister look at reforming that form so that, given the stigma associated with its name, it is no longer called that? The form also states that if people have been sectioned under the Mental Health Act, they have to report it. That requirement is a disgrace and needs to be removed.

**Chloe Smith:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work in looking at such things—not only the form he mentions, but paperwork to assist people with a visual impairment or those who need to register anonymously. This Government can be proud of those achievements, and I would be happy to discuss his points further with him.

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Three thousand eight hundred: that is the number of people nationally with no fixed abode who are registered to vote. Does the Minister agree that that is woefully under-representative of the number of homeless people and families in this country? One way to make it easier for people with no fixed abode to register to vote would be to remove the requirement to print the form. Why is the group of voters with the least access to a printer the only one that has to print out their paperwork?

**Chloe Smith:** As I said in my first answer, homelessness charities and other organisations that assist homeless people are very able to help them with the form, and that is very important. I would also say that this Government are working across the breadth of what we need to do to support those who are homeless, and I regard the ability to register to vote as just one of those pieces of work. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office chairs the taskforce that is looking at how to reduce and eliminate rough sleeping, and that is important work.

### Topical Questions

T1. [905330] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington):** Since our last Cabinet Office questions, the Government have reached an agreement with the Welsh Government on changes to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and an inter-governmental agreement on the establishment of common frameworks. I welcome yesterday's decision by the National Assembly for Wales to grant consent to the Bill, and I place on record the Government's commitment to act along the lines of the inter-governmental agreement respecting devolution, and to seek consent in our dealings with all three devolved nations.

**Gavin Newlands:** Groucho Marx once said, "These are my principles, and if you don't like them—well, I have others." In homage to Groucho, the Scottish Conservatives used to have principles on clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, but they have abandoned them to become isolated, as theirs was the only party to vote for legislative consent in the Scottish Parliament yesterday. Is the right hon. Gentleman ashamed—not just a tad embarrassed—on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives?

**Mr Lidington:** The hon. Gentleman has a question to answer. He and his party support continued membership of the European Union. The powers in the Bill allow for the temporary carrying forward, for a time-limited period, of the frameworks that already exist, and to do so when that is in the interests of Scottish jobs and Scottish consumers. What is the hon. Gentleman's objection to that?

T3. [905332] **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): Many of my constituents have written to me about rolling out voter ID across the country. What assessment has the Minister made of the recent trials?

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith):** We believe that the recent trials have been successful. As I said earlier, we will be evaluating the pilots fully and then taking careful decisions about next steps. We remain of the view that voter fraud is a crime that should be stamped out, and it would be very good if other parties in this place joined us in that belief.

T2. [905331] **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): One of the most shocking elements of the whole Carillion fiasco was the fact that the Cabinet Office saw a letter

from Carillion's accountants in mid-December with a proposal that would have allowed £360 million extra to be put back into the public purse. Will the Minister explain what he did when he saw that recommendation, and why the money was not put back into public purse?

**Mr Lidington:** As a matter of fact, I took up this office on 8 January 2018. I do not think the picture the hon. Gentleman paints is an accurate one. It was only in January that we were presented with details—full details—of what Carillion proposed. It would have been wrong for the Government to bail it out for private sector failures of judgment.

T4. [905333] **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that the civil service in the devolved Administrations receives as much support as the central civil service, and how is he maintaining standards and objectivity across the United Kingdom?

**Mr Lidington:** My Department supports consistent standards of devolution awareness across the civil service. The Cabinet Office runs a cross-Government learning campaign, in partnership with the devolved Administrations, to ensure that there is good practice throughout the United Kingdom.

T7. [905336] **Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): Why did the Government continue to award contracts to Carillion after it had announced a profit warning and its shares had fallen by 75%, making it an obvious risk to the public purse?

**Mr Lidington:** As I set out in detail in my evidence to the Liaison Committee, three of the contracts were actually awarded before the profit warning. The two from HS2 Ltd were part of a joint venture. The other joint venture partners stepped forward, in line with their contracts, to ensure that the project continues with no additional cost to the public purse.

T5. [905334] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): We know that having a job massively reduces reoffending, so will the Government commit to lead through their own example by giving ex-offenders a fair chance of a job?

**Mr Lidington:** I strongly support Ban the Box and other such initiatives. The Cabinet Office will work hard with other Government Departments to ensure that we maximise opportunities for ex-offenders to be given that second chance.

T8. [905337] **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Estimates show that 4,000 people in the five pilot areas were turned away because they did not have the required ID, so will the Government now abandon their plans for voter ID?

**Chloe Smith:** The data so far from the successful five pilots does not seem to provide evidence to support the Opposition's scaremongering. Most people's experience of the pilots was very positive. We will evaluate the next steps before returning to the House with the way forward.

T6. [905335] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What progress is the Department making to encourage technological solutions in the delivery of our public services?

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden)**: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. We are determined that the public sector uses technology to improve services. Indeed, just last week I announced the first GovTech challenges to help tech firms to create innovative, cutting-edge solutions to public service challenges. The first seeks to use artificial intelligence solutions to identify recruitment images that are created by Daesh and spread online.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): We are now in an unsustainable and inconsistent position whereby 16 and 17-year-olds in Scotland and Wales can be trusted to vote in local government elections, yet their counterparts in England and Northern Ireland are denied that right. Does the Minister agree that if we are to maintain the integrity of our electoral process, we must have equal voting rights across the UK?

**Chloe Smith**: First, the Government stood on a manifesto in which we agreed to keep the voting age at 18. Secondly, we believe in devolution. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office has told the House very strongly, our work on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and elsewhere supports devolution. That, I am afraid, is the real answer to the hon. Gentleman's question.

**Mr Speaker**: Colleagues, today the two extremely brave police officers who apprehended the killer of our late friend and colleague Jo Cox are in the Gallery for Prime Minister's questions. I am referring to PC Jonathan Wright and PC Craig Nicholls, both of the West Yorkshire police. Gentlemen, we honour your public service. We thank you for it and we offer you the warmest of welcomes here to the House of Commons today. [*Applause.*]

We are also joined by the former Presiding Officer of the Welsh Assembly, Dame Rosemary Butler, and her husband Derek. Rosemary and Derek, you too are very welcome. Thank you for coming.

## PRIME MINISTER

*The Prime Minister was asked—*

### Engagements

Q1. [905338] **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 16 May.

**The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May)**: I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in offering our best wishes to His Royal Highness Prince Harry and Meghan Markle for their wedding this Saturday, and in wishing the very best for their future lives together. It is also Mental Health Awareness Week, and it is fitting that we mark Prince Harry's tireless work to raise awareness of the ongoing challenges faced by service personnel making the transition to civilian life, including of support for their mental health.

Mr Speaker, may I say how appropriate it is for the House to recognise the bravery and hard work of PC Jonathan Wright and PC Craig Nicholls in apprehending the killer of Jo Cox? When Jo Cox was killed, this House lost one of its best.

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

**Simon Hoare**: Animal welfare and environmental standards are clearly key for British agriculture, but will my right hon. Friend reassure UK farmers that food security and food production will be recognised and at the heart of future UK agriculture policy?

**The Prime Minister**: My hon. Friend raises an important point—he is absolutely right to do so. As we leave the European Union, as he will know, we will have the opportunity to deliver a farming policy that works for the whole industry. That is why we are asking for the views of everyone involved or with an interest about the development of a policy that reflects the reality of life for food producers and farmers, the opportunity to improve our farmed environment and the issues that my hon. Friend raises. Our food has a great reputation—a very high reputation—for quality that is built on high animal welfare standards, strong environmental protections, and the dedication of farmers and growers right across this country.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Lab): Thank you for welcoming PC Wright and PC Nicholls to the Chamber today, Mr Speaker. They did great work, as indeed do police officers all over the country. It was right that you should recognise them on behalf of all of us.

It is Mental Health Awareness Week. I join the Prime Minister in wishing Harry and Meghan all the best, and I thank Harry for his work to highlight the need to challenge the stigma surrounding mental health, and the ability for us all to talk about mental health to ensure that people do not suffer in silence on their own—particularly young people, who are often so grievously affected by this.

When the Prime Minister wrote at the weekend that she wanted

“as little friction as possible”,

was she talking about EU trade or the next Cabinet meeting? [*Laughter.*]

**The Prime Minister**: I think the right hon. Gentleman knows full well that this Government have a policy of leaving the customs union and of ensuring that, as we do so, we have as frictionless trade as possible with the EU, we have a solution that ensures we have no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and we have an independent trade policy. But if he is talking about friction, perhaps he could reflect on the fact that this month, the shadow Health Minister in the Lords voted for a second referendum; that at the weekend, the shadow Brexit Secretary refused to rule out a second referendum; and that on Monday, the shadow International Development Minister tweeted in favour of a second referendum. Perhaps when he stands up he could put the minds of the British people and this House at rest and rule out a second referendum.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The divisions in the Cabinet mean that there has been no progress in negotiations for five months. The reality is that members of the Cabinet are more interested in negotiating with each other than with the European Union. The Prime Minister's promise of

"as little friction as possible"

is in stark contrast with the earlier commitment that this would be "friction-free", so will she explain how much friction she is willing to accept? Businesses and workers in those companies need to know.

**The Prime Minister:** We want to ensure that we can continue to trade in as frictionless a way as possible. The suggestion that trade is entirely frictionless at the moment is not actually correct. We have set three very simple objectives for a future customs union. I will say to the House that achieving those objectives, which I have just set out, will not be easy—it will be difficult. Some will say, "Forget about an independent trade policy"—that is not the position of this Government. Some might say, "Don't worry about the Northern Irish border"—that is not the position of this Government. It is absolutely right that we aim to achieve those three objectives. The right hon. Gentleman talks about progress. We will be publishing a White Paper in a few weeks showing how much progress we are making.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Ministers are no nearer to agreeing a White Paper than they are a strategy for going forward. I remind the Prime Minister that UK has the slowest economic growth of all major economies, and its growth overall is slower than that of the eurozone. The Government's uncertainty and recklessness are putting jobs and investment at risk. Last week, Airbus confirmed that its space contract would move abroad post Brexit and that it was considering its overall position in the UK because of the Government's complete lack of clarity. How many other businesses have warned her that they too are considering their future in this country?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman talks about preparations for the negotiations and the White Paper. Let us remember what his position was—*[Interruption.]* His position was that we should have triggered article 50 immediately after the referendum, with no work having been done in preparation for the negotiations. He would not even have had a white page, let alone a White Paper, to base his negotiations on. What would that have led to? It would have led to what Labour does every time it is in government—it would have sold Britain out.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The problem is that the Prime Minister's own position is not even supported by her Cabinet. Rolls-Royce has said:

"We're worried about border checks...we need to be thoughtful and careful about"

future investments. Ford has said:

"any sort of border restrictions or customs friction is going to be an inhibitor to us continuing".

Vauxhall says:

"We cannot invest in a world of uncertainty".

Businesses are understandably frustrated by the Government. This week, the Environment Secretary

gave his view on the Prime Minister's preferred customs partnership model. He said that

"there have to be significant question marks over the deliverability of it on time"

as it "has flaws". Well, at least he didn't call it "crazy", as the Foreign Secretary did. If the Prime Minister cannot convince even her own Cabinet of her strategy, what chance does she have with 27 other European countries?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman has taken this view of our position in the negotiations before. Before December, he said we would not get a joint report, and we did. Before March, he said we would not get an implementation period, and we did, and we continue to negotiate. He asks what British businesses are doing. I will tell him what they are doing. They are creating more jobs in this country, meaning that we now have record levels of employment. What did we see under Labour? Half a million more people unemployed—because Labour Governments always leave office with more people out of work than when they went in.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** May I congratulate the Prime Minister on record numbers of zero-hours contracts, record numbers of people in in-work poverty, and a record of wages lower today than 10 years ago? May I also congratulate her on formally dividing her Cabinet into rival camps—as if it needed doing—to consider two different models? As a process of parliamentary scrutiny, I hope that both Sub-Committees will report directly to the House so that we can all make up our minds on the rival factions in her Cabinet.

While the Prime Minister's Government dither, the Dutch Government have now begun training the first batch of extra customs officials to deal with the reintroduction of customs checks for British goods at Dutch borders. In October, the Prime Minister's official spokesperson said, "HMRC"—*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The right hon. Gentleman will complete his question more quickly if Members do not shout—*[Interruption.]* Order. Mr Colin Clark, I do not require your assistance. You are an amiable enough fellow, but no assistance for the Chair from you is required.

I want to accommodate Back Benchers, and I will do so today, as I always do. I am concerned about people who want to ask questions. If people do not want to ask questions, they must shush and listen, and if they do want to ask questions, they had certainly better keep schtum.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is a very straightforward question. How many additional HMRC staff have been recruited to deal with Brexit?

**The Prime Minister:** As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we are indeed making preparations for all contingencies, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced money which has been allocated to Departments to make those necessary preparations.

May I correct what the right hon. Gentleman said at the beginning of his question? He referred to zero-hours contracts. In fact, if we look at the figures, we see that

almost two thirds of the increase in employment in the past year has been in full-time work, more than three quarters of the growth in employment since 2010 has been in full-time work, and about 70% of the rise in employment since 2010 has been in highly skilled work. Perhaps, when he stands up, the right hon. Gentleman will welcome the jobs that have been created under this Government.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The question that I asked the Prime Minister was, “How many more HMRC officials have been recruited?” She has not answered it. Let me help her, and say that if more are being recruited, as is being claimed, they will not even make up for the cuts made in the last eight years. It seems that the Dutch Government are more prepared for dealing with Brexit than the British Government.

We have had 23 months since the referendum. We have just 10 months in which to complete negotiations, and the Government are in complete disarray. On both sides of the negotiations, the reality is dawning that deadlines are at risk of not being met. More and more jobs are at risk as more and more businesses openly consider the options for relocating their jobs. The Government are so busy negotiating with themselves that they cannot negotiate with anyone else. If the Prime Minister cannot negotiate a good deal for Britain, why does she not step aside and let Labour negotiate a comprehensive new customs union and living standards backed by trade unions and business in this country? Step aside, and make way for those who will negotiate it.

**The Prime Minister:** What we have seen under this Government are more jobs being created, and more high-paid jobs being created. We have delivered on our December joint report on Brexit, and in March on the implementation period. Let us look at what we would see from the Labour party. With Labour Members, you simply cannot trust a word that they say. They said that they would strike new trade deals, but what do they want? They want to be in a customs union that would ensure that they could not strike new trade deals. Promise broken. They said that they would scrap student debt, but after the election they went back on that. Promise broken. They said that they would tackle anti-Semitism. Promise broken. Only the Conservative party can be trusted by the British people to deliver a Brexit that is in the interests of British people, and to deliver opportunity for all in a Britain that is fit for the future.

Q3. [905340] **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): Yesterday we had the fantastic news that real wages are rising, which, combined with the threshold where people now begin to pay tax, will mean people in North Warwickshire and Bedworth keep more of the money they earn and have more money in their pockets. Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming this good news, and does she agree that we need to keep backing our workers and great local businesses to deliver even more well-paid jobs?

**The Prime Minister:** I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in welcoming the good economic news, not just that more people are in employment but that real wages are up. I note that when I challenged him to do so, the Leader of the Opposition was unwilling to welcome the

number of jobs that have been created in this country that mean there are more people with a regular income to look after their families. And as my hon. Friend says, the news that real wages are up means more money in people's pockets under the Conservatives.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in wishing Ramadan Mubarak to all Muslims preparing to start the month of Ramadan today.

Last night the Scottish Parliament voted by 93 votes to 30 to refuse consent to the withdrawal Bill. The Scottish National party, the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens all voted to refuse consent. The Conservatives are isolated and out of touch with the people of Scotland. Will the Prime Minister respect the will of the Scottish Parliament and work with the Scottish Government to amend the withdrawal Bill?

**The Prime Minister:** We have been working with the Scottish Government for some time now, as we have been working with the Welsh Government, on this issue. First, decisions that the devolved Administrations are able to make before exit will continue to be able to be made by them after exit. What the Bill does is set out a mechanism that respects devolution and lets us maintain the integrity of our own common market as we work out the long-term solutions. That is a reasonable and sensible way forward. The Welsh Government and now the Welsh Assembly, including Labour and Liberal Democrat Members of the Welsh Assembly, agree with that. I think it is right that we go ahead with measures that not only respect devolution, but ensure we maintain the integrity of our common market.

**Ian Blackford:** If the Prime Minister wishes to respect the Scottish Parliament, she should respect last night's vote. It is very simple: the Tories are seeking to veto the democratic wishes of the Scottish Parliament. This is absolutely unprecedented. If this Government force through the legislation without the consent of the Scottish Parliament, the Prime Minister will be doing so in the full knowledge that they are breaking the 20-year-old devolution settlement. Will the Prime Minister reassure the House that the withdrawal Bill will not go through without the consent of the Scottish Parliament?

**The Prime Minister:** Of course we are disappointed that the Scottish Parliament has not granted its consent; we have been working hard in recent months to find a way through on this issue and clause, and the effort put into this has been shown by the fact that the Welsh Government and Assembly have given their consent to this Bill. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that we want to ensure the integrity of the United Kingdom's common market, and when he talks about the democratic will he might wish to recall the fact that it was the democratic will of the Scottish people to remain in the United Kingdom.

Q5. [905342] **Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): The 12 in-bed provision at Rothbury Community Hospital in my constituency was removed without adequate consultation back in September 2016. The Save Rothbury Hospital campaign and I have worked closely together to get transparency on that decision and return the in-bed provision for our vast

and sparsely populated Coquet valley. Does the Prime Minister agree that the NHS should be investing in community hospitals, which can provide that low-level nursing for convalescence and palliative care for my constituents and others, and will she support our campaign to get it back?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to be raising this issue on behalf of her constituents in the way that she is. I understand this issue is currently being considered by the Independent Reconfiguration Panel, which will then advise my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary. I am sure my hon. Friend will recognise that, as the issue is under an independent review at present, I will not go into further detail on the specifics, but on the general point I wholeheartedly agree with her that community hospitals are a vital part of the range of services we want to see in our NHS.

Q2. [905339] **Jenny Chapman** (Darlington) (Lab): Why is it that over half the young people referred for specialist mental health treatment by their GP are not receiving care?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Lady will know that we have been doing much to improve the facilities of treatment for those people with mental health problems. We are putting record levels of money into mental health. We are also making a number of changes—for example, increasing the training of teachers and other members of staff in schools better to identify mental health problems among young people and to ensure that they can be properly dealt with. Is there more for us to do? Yes there is, because for too many years in this country, Government after Government did not treat mental health problems in the way that they should have done. We have recognised the need to raise awareness of mental health issues earlier, and this Government are putting more money and facilities in to ensure that those with mental health problems are properly treated and given the treatment they deserve.

Q10. [905347] **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): Derbyshire's Labour police and crime commissioner is advertising for two new members of staff at a combined cost of more than £90,000 while also increasing his council tax precept. Given that this will take the commissioner's office staff numbers up to 19, excluding the commissioner and his deputy—which is actually more than the number of police officers in Erewash—does my right hon. Friend agree that Labour is again prioritising jobs for the boys over brave boots on the ground?

**The Prime Minister:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. As she will know, we have protected police funding since 2015. For 2018-19, including council tax, there will be an additional £460 million investment available to policing, and we have been able to do that because of the balanced approach that we have taken to our economy. As she points out, however, it is police and crime commissioners who are locally accountable for the decisions that they make, and she is absolutely right to raise this issue and the decisions made by her local police and crime commissioner on behalf of her constituents.

Q4. [905341] **Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): Figures released by the OECD on 27 April show that inward investment into the UK in 2017 slumped by 90% in comparison with 2016, which is one of the largest one-year drops in foreign direct investment ever recorded in any country. It is crystal clear that if this downward trend continues, it will have a catastrophic impact on steel and the other manufacturing and service industries that are the lifeblood of our economy in Aberavon, in Wales and in the UK. In order to reverse the profound market uncertainty that has caused FDI to plummet in this way, will the Prime Minister now confirm that she is prepared to keep an open mind on our country rejoining EFTA—the European Free Trade Association—and remaining in the European economic area? Will she also recognise the fact that there is a strong cross-party consensus for—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am sorry; this is an extremely important question, but Members really do need to be sensitive to the fact that lots of other people want to ask questions.

**The Prime Minister:** If the hon. Gentleman looks at what we have seen in the past few months, he will see company after company announcing investment in this country, which is leading to more jobs here. Yes, as we look ahead to leaving the European Union, we need to ensure that our customs arrangements will meet the three tests that I set out earlier: an independent trade policy enabling us to do trade deals around the world; as frictionless as possible a border with the EU; and ensuring that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. That is exactly what the Government are working to produce.

Q12. [905349] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): As we approach the first anniversary of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House are with the victims and their families. Very sadly, far too few of the survivors have a permanent home to call their own. In advance of Dame Judith Hackitt's long-promised review of building regulations, will my right hon. Friend update the House on the work that the Government have done to ensure that buildings across the UK that are of similar design to Grenfell Tower are safe, so that we do not have a repetition of that terrible tragedy?

**The Prime Minister:** As we approach the anniversary of the appalling tragedy that was the Grenfell Tower fire, our thoughts are with the victims and survivors and all those affected by that tragedy. My hon. Friend refers to rehousing. There are 210 households in total that are in need of a new home, and I understand that 201 households have accepted an offer of either temporary or permanent accommodation.

On the issue of the safety of buildings, the fire and rescue services have visited more than 1,250 high-rise buildings, and immediate action has been taken to ensure the safety of every resident. Councils and housing associations must remove dangerous cladding quickly, but paying for these works must not undermine their ability to do important maintenance and repair work. I have worked closely with my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Housing Secretary, and I can today confirm that the Government will fully fund the removal

and replacement of dangerous cladding by councils and housing associations, estimated at £400 million. The Housing Secretary will set out further details later this week.

**Q6.** [905343] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I join hon. Members in paying tribute to Tessa Jowell—an amazing woman, politician and friend. Some remember the Olympic games as Tessa’s crowning achievement, but those of us who were closest to her know that they were not what she was most of proud of. As a true memorial, and in the week in which the Government can find £50 million for grammar schools, will the Prime Minister commit to funding Tessa’s proudest achievement: Sure Start?

**The Prime Minister:** We all recognise the significant contribution that the late Baroness Jowell made in the various roles that she undertook in government and to the various issues that she championed. Sure Start centres remain a key part of delivering the best start in life for every child, but we have built on that legacy by introducing 15 hours of free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds and 30 hours of free childcare for three and four-year-olds. Just as importantly, we are focusing on quality, with 94% of early years providers now rated good or outstanding, the result of which is a record number of children ready for school. We will continue to work to ensure that every child gets the best start in life.

**Mr Speaker:** In warmly welcoming him back to his place, I call Mr Owen Paterson.

**Mr Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I want to register my heartfelt thanks to all the staff at the Midland Centre for Spinal Injuries at the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital in my constituency. Without their extraordinary skill, professionalism and simple human kindness, I would not be here today.

The House of Commons Library confirms that an estimated 63% of Members of this House represent constituencies that voted leave. Does the Prime Minister agree that should those Members not support her by voting for her programme of taking back control by leaving the single market, the customs union—any customs union—and the remit of the European Court of Justice, they will be denying the democratic vote of their constituents and doing lasting damage to our democracy?

**The Prime Minister:** I am happy to join my right hon. Friend in commending the work of all at the Midland Centre for Spinal Injuries, and we are pleased to see him back in his place in the Chamber.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that this Government are delivering on the vote of the British people, which was to leave the European Union. As we do that, we will ensure that we get the best Brexit deal for the United Kingdom. I consider it to be a matter of politicians’ integrity that having given the choice to the British people we should then deliver for them on that choice.

**Q7.** [905344] **Teresa Pearce** (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): This afternoon, 1,000 handwritten letters will arrive at Downing Street asking the Prime Minister to intervene personally in the stalemate between NHS England and

the drug company Vertex to get the cystic fibrosis drug Orkambi issued to patients in the UK without delay. One of those letters is from seven-year-old Luis, who says:

“Dear Mrs May,

Please can you give Orkambi to me so I will feel much better and won’t have to spend so much time in hospital.”

What is the Prime Minister’s response? Will she?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Lady raises an important issue. Cystic fibrosis is obviously a terrible, life-limiting condition, and it is right that patients should have access to cost-effective, innovative medicines and technologies. The issue has been taken up by Members from across the House and, as the hon. Lady mentioned, there is an ongoing dialogue between NHS England and Vertex, but I am keen to see a speedy resolution to the negotiations. I understand that several Members have asked to see me about the issue, and I am happy for that to happen.

**Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): The freedom of the press was upheld in a series of votes in this place last week. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is still important to hold newspapers’ feet to the fire on standards? Will she join me in encouraging further progress in this area?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This House has voted to uphold the freedom of the press, which is an important underpinning of our democracy. Of course we expect high standards from our press and, as he will know, arrangements have been put in place to ensure there is that opportunity, through various bodies, to deal with the issue. It is important that everybody in this House is ready to accept—although we do not always agree with what the press say, and sometimes what they say is uncomfortable—that the freedom of the press is an important part of our democracy.

**Q8.** [905345] **Thelma Walker** (Colne Valley) (Lab): I welcome the fact that the Health Secretary is in listening mode and has referred the plans for downgrading Huddersfield Royal Infirmary back to the trust. Now, here is the challenge. Nationally, how will the Government fill the 34,000 nursing vacancies, recruit the 47% of vacancies in GP surgeries, increase funding for community NHS services, fix Kirklees Council’s social care funding gap of £9 million a year and protect our NHS so it is free at the point of use in its 70th year?

**The Prime Minister:** It remains true that, to uphold its principles, we are putting more money into the national health service. In November 2017 my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced that a further £10 billion is going into the national health service. I have said that we will have a review for a long-term plan for the national health service, which will include multi-year funding. The hon. Lady refers to the numbers of doctors and nurses, and we have more nurses and more doctors in our national health service today than we did when we came into government.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): A growing number of university students are struggling with their mental health and, tragically, suicide has

risen among students. My right hon. Friend has shown her commitment to mental health among young people with the plans for mental healthcare in schools. Will she make the mental health of university students her next priority?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend of course raises an important point. As she says, we have put a focus on the mental health of children in schools because we know that a significant proportion of mental health problems start before a child reaches the age of 14. She makes an important point about university students, and that is certainly something I will look into.

**Q9.** [905346] **Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool South) (Lab): Erasmus+ is the EU programme that, for 30 years, has given 600,000 people from the UK—apprentices, students, businesses and workers—the chance to train, study or volunteer abroad. The Government have said that Erasmus+ is safe until 2020 but have made no commitments to keep it thereafter. Erasmus+ is being forgotten about. Keeping all those benefits, especially for younger people, many in Blackpool, is one thing that unites both leave and remain. Will the Prime Minister make sure that Erasmus+ is now a top-line item for her Ministers and give us this pledge today?

**The Prime Minister:** We have not forgotten about Erasmus, or indeed a number of other programmes that give opportunities for universities and students here in the United Kingdom. We have said there are certain programmes that we wish to remain part of when we leave the European Union, and Erasmus is one of those we have cited that we may wish to remain part of, but of course we are in a negotiation with the European Union and we will be dealing with these matters in that negotiation.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Mr Speaker, you are looking resplendent in your Arsenal tie.

I was fortunate enough to go to Djibouti, an African country with great challenges, with UNICEF. I am sure everybody in this House will want to see the UK do more with trade in Africa. Given that 485 of us voted to allow the Prime Minister to trigger article 50, does she agree that we should support her leadership and support the UK in getting the best deal so that we can trade with Africans and help lift them out of poverty?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend raises a very important point. When we leave the European Union we will be able to negotiate those trade deals in our interest, and not rely on Brussels negotiating trade deals for us. We will have that independent trade policy, and certainly we will be looking to do trade deals with a number of countries in Africa. I took the opportunity at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting to speak to a number of leaders from Africa about just this issue.

**Q11.** [905348] **Sir Kevin Barron** (Rother Valley) (Lab): In February 2015, after the publication of the Casey report on child sexual exploitation in Rotherham, the Prime Minister, in her previous role, said that if resources were needed, they must be provided. However, the Fusion bid has received only just over 30% of the funding requested. This funding is desperately needed to support survivors of CSE and to pursue convictions against the

perpetrators. Will she ask the Home Secretary and the Justice Secretary to authorise the rest of the funding as a matter of urgency?

**The Prime Minister:** I say to the right hon. Gentleman that, obviously, we were all appalled at the revelations of what had happened in terms of CSE in Rotherham and, sadly, in other parts of the country. I will ask the Home Secretary to look at the issue. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, certainly as regards police funding, there are arrangements whereby bids can be put in to the Home Office. Those are properly considered and discussed with the police force in question, with decisions taken on that basis.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): My constituent Sharon Hollman went through the devastating loss of her teenage son, who committed suicide. She is seeking a serious case review by Kent County Council about multi-agency failings that meant he did not get appropriate mental health support. This week is Mental Health Awareness Week. What reassurance can the Prime Minister give to my constituent and others about the need to ensure that we have appropriate mental health support for children and that lessons are learned from this tragic loss?

**The Prime Minister:** I am sure the sympathies of the whole House will be with Sharon, because no parent should have to endure the agony of burying their child. May I reassure my hon. Friend that we are absolutely committed to seeing mental health services improve on the ground? That is why we have committed to making an additional £1.4 billion available to improve children and young people's mental health services, and we have committed to ensuring that by 2020-21, 70,000 more children and young people each year will have access to high-quality NHS mental health care. On the specific case she has raised, I know that my right hon. Friends the Education and Communities Secretaries will be happy to look into the detail of it in order to ensure that lessons are indeed learned.

**Q13.** [905350] **Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I have been working with a group of parents who have adult children who were seeking long-term accommodation. They were advised and encouraged to use the support for mortgage interest scheme. The Government have since abolished the scheme and replaced it with a loan, which has caused a great deal of hurt, concern and confusion. Mencap has asked for this group of adult children to be exempted from the changes. Will the Prime Minister meet me, Mencap and a small representative group of parents to see how we can put right the hurt that has been caused and make sure that these people have the proper accommodation available for them?

**The Prime Minister:** I will look into the specific issue the hon. Gentleman has raised and ensure that the appropriate Secretary of State meets him to discuss the issue with him.

**Alec Shelbrooke** (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Russian military naval activity in the north Atlantic is at its highest level since the 1980s. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the funding of the Royal Navy under this Government?

**The Prime Minister:** I am pleased to make the House aware, once again, of the significant funding that is going into our defence forces—into our armed forces—including a significant investment in the ships of the Royal Navy. I am pleased to have been on the Queen Elizabeth, the new aircraft carrier, which is a fine representation of the commitment we put into our defence spending. As my hon. Friend will know, a modernising defence programme review is taking place, involving the Ministry of Defence, the Treasury and No. 10. We will be looking, in due course, at any changes that need to be made to ensure that our defence capabilities do indeed meet the threats we face.

Q14. [905351] **Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): We must continue to have the closest possible relationship with the single market if we are to avoid taking a major hit on our economy, but time is rapidly running out for us to negotiate a bespoke new deal. What possible reason can there be for the Prime Minister not giving Members of Parliament the earliest possible opportunity to vote in this place on the European economic area?

**The Prime Minister:** This House has had and will continue to have many opportunities to debate these issues in relation to the European Union and the United Kingdom's future relationship with it. There will be not only the meaningful vote that has been promised, but the voting on the European withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill that will come before this House and on a number of other relevant Bills for our Brexit.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Thousands more homes across North Yorkshire will receive access to superfast broadband thanks to the Government's investment in North Yorkshire County Council. Much of that will be connected with fibre direct to the premises. Does the Prime Minister agree that fibre represents gold-standard broadband and that local authorities must use all their powers to ensure that developers install fibre broadband when building new homes?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend makes the very important point that access to superfast broadband is important not only for individuals but for people who run businesses from home and in his community. It is important that we look ahead and that, when local authorities put these arrangements in place, they provide the best opportunity for people so that not only people's personal interest in accessing broadband but the interests of the local economy can be met.

Q15. [905352] **Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): My constituent, Jan Steyn, is an incredibly hard-working Church of Scotland minister, who has made North East Fife his home over the past seven years. He has been denied leave to remain because he temporarily served the Scots Kirk in Paris. Will the Prime Minister meet me and the Church of Scotland to discuss that issue?

**The Prime Minister:** I will ensure that the Home Secretary looks carefully at the case and is in touch with the hon. Gentleman.

**Ross Thomson** (Aberdeen South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my disappointment and regret that we did not secure a legislative consent memorandum

in the Scottish Parliament? Does she share my concern that Scottish Labour and Scottish Liberal Democrats have become the midwives for the Scottish National party's crusade to tear apart the Union, leaving only the Scottish Conservatives as the party that wants to get on and make a success of Brexit?

**The Prime Minister:** I share my hon. Friend's disappointment. As I said in response to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), we have worked long and hard with the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government on those proposals. The Welsh Government and the Welsh Assembly have accepted them; Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the Welsh Assembly voted for them. It is a shame that it was not possible in the Scottish Parliament for agreement to be reached with the Scottish Government. As my hon. Friend said, we all want to deliver a Brexit that is good for the whole of the United Kingdom.

**Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): Following the completion at the end of the year of the Boundary Commission's review, which will apply to the whole of the United Kingdom, reducing the number of constituencies and Members in this House, has the Prime Minister further considered the resulting relative increase in the size of the Executive in this place? May I urge her not to apply the policy that is currently being applied to Northern Ireland of not having any Ministers, refusing to appoint any and allowing civil servants to run the place?

**The Prime Minister:** Obviously we will look at the consequences of the proposals for the number of elected Members of Parliament in this House. I wish to see Ministers in Northern Ireland, able to take decisions for Northern Ireland. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, that depends on our being able to get agreement among the parties for reinstating the Northern Ireland Executive and allowing the Northern Ireland Assembly to play its full part in the affairs of Northern Ireland. We will continue to work with all parties because I believe that it is in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland for that devolved Executive to be reinstated.

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): This year of all years, millions of people wish to remember the sacrifices of our servicemen and women in conflicts around the world, but in my constituency, Hillmorton branch of the Royal British Legion tells me that there is a danger that its annual parade will not take place because of challenges in arranging road closures. Will the Prime Minister meet me to see how that situation and perhaps others across the country might be resolved?

**The Prime Minister:** We absolutely agree that it is right that we commemorate the contribution of British and Commonwealth military and civilian servicemen and women involved in the two world wars and later conflicts. As I understand it, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport co-ordinates the event in London, but perhaps the Secretary of State for Transport will need to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter, although I suspect that it also involves local authorities and the police in his area. I encourage those discussions. We do not want any of the commemorative events not to take place because of a lack of arrangements being put in place for them.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Lakes line from Oxenholme to Windermere has seen 160 cancellations in the month of April and 72 cancellations in the first week of May alone, risking the potential futures of GCSE students as they try to get to school and are left stranded, people trying to get to work, and the hundreds and hundreds of people visiting what is Britain's second biggest tourist and visitor destination. Will the Prime Minister join me in saying that that is an outrage; will she use her office to ensure that Northern has the franchise removed from it; and will she undo the damage to the Lakes line by keeping the Government's initial promise to electrify that line?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary is aware of the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. I understand that the Department for Transport is working with Northern Rail to identify the nature of these issues and to see a quick resolution of them.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Despite clear evidence of potentially criminal wrongdoing, our regulators and law enforcement agencies seem unwilling or unable to take action against those at the highest level responsible for the business banking scandals at RBS, Lloyds and HBOS. Will the Prime Minister do everything that she can to make sure that those people are held to account regardless of their status, seniority or background?

**The Prime Minister:** This is an issue that my hon. Friend has not only raised today but been a tireless campaigner on, and he is absolutely right. Small businesses are the backbone of our economy, and it is vital that lessons are learned from what happened at RBS and at HBOS in Reading. As he will know, the Financial Conduct Authority has reported that there were areas of widespread inappropriate treatment of firms by RBS. That was unacceptable. He will also know that the events at HBOS in Reading constituted criminal activity for which those responsible were brought to justice. The independent FCA is currently investigating matters arising from both of those cases. I look forward to receiving its conclusions, but it is important that we do ensure that this matter is fully addressed, and addressed properly, so that it does not happen again.

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): If, like Jane, the Prime Minister had worked nights at Sainsbury's for the past 30 years, how would she regard its plans to cut her pay by £2,000 as one of 13,000 people due a pay cut in 2020? Does she agree with boss Mike Coupe that those people are "in the money", or does she see it as an insult to Jane's hard work, her determination, and her abilities in just about managing?

**The Prime Minister:** We recognise the hard work that many people such as the hon. Lady's constituent put in day in, day out to keep our economy going. I will look at the issue that she has raised, but these are commercial decisions that are taken by the employer and by Sainsbury's.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

12.52 pm

**Mr Nicholas Brown** (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We look to you to protect the conventions of this House. It is a long-standing convention that when the Government propose to make a statement to the House, the Opposition Front-Bench team, through the usual channels, is afforded sight of the statement an hour or so before it is due to be made. It is understood that commercially confidential matters can be redacted, but the convention has been scrupulously adhered to by previous Conservative Governments and, up until now, by the current Conservative Government and by previous Labour Governments as well. It is also a convention of this House that the Government do not bring statements on those days that are specified in our Standing Orders as being for the parliamentary Opposition to choose the topics.

Both of those conventions have been breached today. This is the third time that the Government have tabled statements on Opposition days. The reason is obvious: it is to erode the principal debates. Mr Speaker, you know today's debates are heavily subscribed. What can you do to protect us from what I regard as a constitutional outrage?

**Crispin Blunt** (Reigate) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** No, no. No further point is required. I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

Let me say to the House this: I have been advised by the Secretary of State for Transport, who beetled up to the Chair to catch a word with me during Prime Minister's questions, that the statement is commercially sensitive. I have no reason to seek to gainsay the right hon. Gentleman. I do not know whether it is, but no doubt it has such an element. It is regrettable if there is not very substantial notice for the Opposition. [*Interruption.*] Order. I am dealing with the matter. I do not need any help from the Secretary of State. I am advised that the Opposition did in the end have approximately half an hour's notice of this statement, and I am happy to hear from the Secretary of State if he wants to respond to the point of order.

On the point about the making of Government statements on Opposition days, this is by no means unprecedented, including under previous Governments. However, if I may say so—and I will—it is highly undesirable for there to be statements on very substantial public policy matters, in which the House will doubtless be interested, on an Opposition day. One looks to people traditionally with responsibility for safeguarding the rights of the House, of whom the Chair is one, but not the only one, to take these matters very seriously. This is an undesirable state of affairs, and if it were to happen on further occasions, a great many hon. and right hon. Members, not to mention interested parties in the Opposition day debates outside the Chamber, would view it, frankly, as an abuse. I hope that that message is heard loudly and clearly on the Government Front Bench, at the highest level, by the people in particular by whom it needs to be heard. If I have to make the point again on future occasions, and to use the powers of the Chair to facilitate the rights of this House in other ways, no matter what flak emanates from the Executive, I will do so in the future, as I have

always done over the past nine years, and no one and nothing will stop me doing my duty by the House of Commons.

If the Secretary of State wants to respond to the point of order, he is very welcome to do so.

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):** It is in the statement.

**Mr Speaker:** Very well. I will indulge the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt).

**Crispin Blunt:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Seven minutes ago, *The Guardian's* "Politics live" with Andrew Sparrow said:

"East coast rail franchise to be brought back under public control."

It appears that someone has broken an embargo, or something has gone wrong, because I guess that that is what the Secretary of State's statement is to be about. Will you put investigations in place to find out why that statement has been made before we have had the opportunity to listen to it from the Secretary of State?

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and I respect his sincerity, but it is not for me to initiate inquiries on this matter. I say two things to the hon. Gentleman whose point I otherwise take very seriously. First, let us see what is in the statement, and whether in fact there has been a leak. Secondly, were it to transpire that there had been, that would be a matter to be laid squarely at the door of the Department whose statement it is, and it would be incumbent on the Secretary of State in those circumstances to initiate any such inquiry. At this point, we should hear the statement. I thank the Secretary of State for approaching the Dispatch Box to deliver it.

## East Coast Main Line

12.58 pm

### **The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):**

Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the future of the east coast main line. As was made clear in the point of order that we have just heard, it has been quite important to try today to handle the release of this information in as controlled a way as possible. We did, of course, approach the Opposition earlier this morning, and explained how we were going to communicate the information to them. My officials shared this statement with the Opposition parties shortly after 12 o'clock, at approximately the same time that Stagecoach was itself told about this—both would expect to be given warning of what is a significant and, for them, market and price sensitive announcement.

Let me set out what I have to say today. The House will recall that, back in November, I set out details of our rail strategy, and our plans to integrate the operation of track and trains. I also indicated that one of the key parts of that plan was to address what were then well-documented problems on the east coast main line by creating a new, integrated rail operation on that route.

In February, I gave the House an update on the financial problems on the east coast main line, and indicated that the current franchise would run out of money within months. This is not because the route is failing—it continues, and will continue, to generate substantial returns for the Government, and the most recent figures show passenger satisfaction at 92%. The route has its challenges, but it is not a failing railway. However, as I explained in February, Stagecoach and Virgin Trains got their bid wrong and they are now paying a price. They will have lost nearly £200 million meeting their contracted commitments. This means that taxpayers have not lost out because revenues are lower than predicted; only Virgin Trains East Coast and its parent companies have made losses at this time.

As the Brown review said in 2013, in an effective railway industry franchises can occasionally fail. But we do not, and cannot, expect companies to hold unlimited liabilities when they take on franchises—they would simply not bid for them if they had to. This means that franchises sometimes do fail, which is why a Conservative Government previously created the structures for the operator of last resort to ensure that we can always guarantee passenger services if franchises cannot continue.

In my statement in February, I said that I was considering two options to continue delivering passenger services in the run-up to the creation of the new east coast partnership. The first was to permit Stagecoach to continue to operate the railway on a not-for-profit basis until 2020, and to permit it to earn a performance-related payment at the end of its contract. The alternative was to implement an operator of last resort, bringing the route back into the temporary control of my Department, as provided for in legislation. Last autumn I established a team to prepare this as an alternative to use if required.

In the past two months, my Department has carried out a full analysis of these options, focusing on how each performs against the key principles that I set out in February: protecting passenger interests; ensuring value for money for taxpayers; and supporting investment

and improvement in the railway. I am today publishing my Department's assessment. To summarise, the analysis suggested that the case was very finely balanced, with some elements favouring a contract with the existing operator and others favouring the operator of last resort. When judged against my key principles, neither option was obviously superior. I have, however, taken another factor into account. I want to make the smoothest possible transition to the creation of the new east coast partnership. Given this finely balanced judgment, I have taken into account broader considerations and decided to use the current difficulties to drive forward sooner with our long-term plans for the east coast partnership.

I have decided to begin the transition process towards creating the new partnership now. This will be in the long-term interests of passengers, as every member of staff on the railway will be focused solely on delivering an excellent service for the future. I am therefore informing the House that I will terminate Virgin Trains East Coast's contract on 24 June 2018. I plan to use a period of operator of last resort control to shape the new partnership. On the same day, we will start with the launch of the new, long-term brand for the east coast main line through the recreation of one of Britain's iconic rail brands, the London and North Eastern Railway.

The team that have been working for me since last autumn to form the operator of last resort will take immediate control of passenger services, and will then begin the task of working with Network Rail to bring together the teams operating the track and trains on the LNER network. I am creating a new board, with an independent chair, to oversee the operation of the LNER route. The board will work with my Department to build the new partnership. It will have representatives of both the train operating team and Network Rail, as well as independent members, who importantly will ensure that the interests of other operators on the route are taken into account. I will appoint an interim chair shortly, and will then begin the recruitment process for a long-term appointment.

When the new LNER operation is fully formed, it will be a partnership between the public and private sectors. In all circumstances ownership of the infrastructure will remain in the public sector, but I believe that the railway is at its strongest when it is a genuine partnership between public and private. The final structure of the LNER will need to be shaped in conformity with the primary legislation that governs the industry, but my objective remains to move to a situation that leaves one single team operating the railway, with the simple goal of ensuring that they continue the work of the existing operators in improving services for passengers.

The rigorous process that we have followed underlines our commitment to ensuring that businesses operate under firm but fair rules. This Government are willing to take tough decisions when necessary to ensure that we build a stronger, fairer economy for all. I do not want these changes to cause passengers any anxiety at all. I want to reassure them that there will be no change to train services, the timetable will remain the same, tickets purchased for future travel—including season tickets—will continue to be valid, and customers will continue to be able to book their travel in the normal way. The ambitions that we have for services will also continue.

[Chris Grayling]

I want to reassure staff that the changes will not impact on their continued employment. It will be no different from a normal franchise change. Indeed, I want the LNER to have employees at its heart, so I am instructing the new board, working with my officials, to bring forward proposals that will enable employees to share directly in the success of the LNER as a pure train operator and subsequently as the new partnership. I am pleased to announce that Andy Street, the Mayor of the West Midlands and the former chief executive of John Lewis, has agreed to provide the team with informal advice about how best to achieve this.

I have already set out my plans to restructure the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern franchise, following the successful delivery of the Thameslink programme. I have indicated that we will separate it into two or more franchises after the end of the current contract in 2021. We have not yet reached a decision on how to operate Great Northern services. However, I have had initial discussions with the Mayor of London about the possibility of transferring some of these to London Overground, as recommended in Chris Gibb's report. Any change will be subject to consultation, but there is also an operational case for integrating Great Northern services from King's Cross into the new LNER operation. I am asking my officials and the new LNER board to do feasibility work on this option.

I have also taken official advice about the future of the passports currently held by Virgin Holdings and Stagecoach, determining whether they are fit and proper to operate on our railways. A multidisciplinary panel has considered the situation and recommended that both companies continue as train operators. The panel advised that there is no suggestion of either malpractice or malicious intent in what has happened. Clearly we have to be vigilant about future financial commitments, but in my view those organisations have paid a high financial and reputational price for what has happened. This Government operate firm but fair rules in their dealing with business, and I have been advised that it would not be reasonable to remove or place conditions on the companies' passports. However, this decision is provisional and will be subject to further review at the point at which the VTEC contract is terminated.

It is vital that we remember the benefits that the railway has seen since privatisation. Passenger numbers have doubled. New trains with new technology are being rolled out right across the network. Innovation has driven up passenger satisfaction. We are seeing a huge amount of private investment in the future of our railway, and the lessons of the financial failure of the east coast main line are already being, and must continue to be, learned. But our ambitions are bigger.

In the rail strategy that we published last year, we began to look at the future of the industry in order to make the private sector model fit for changing travel patterns and new technology, and to focus on a better quality passenger experience. These advances would not be possible if we returned to nationalisation and lost private sector innovation. This work will conclude in time for the spending review to ensure that we improve how we enhance the private sector drive to improve services for passengers in the coming years in a way that is fair for taxpayers and passengers.

Of course, the passengers on the east coast main line are the most important people in all this, and 92% of them say that they are happy with their travel experience. The steps I have put in place today will help to deliver even more for them, with the recreation of one of Britain's most iconic rail brands; the start of the proper recreation of an integrated regional rail operation; and the arrival of the brand new intercity express trains later this year, the majority of which will be built at Hitachi's plant in Newton Aycliffe in County Durham, continuing to support 700 jobs in the north-east. I believe that this strategy will set this railway on a path to a better future. I commend this statement to the House.

1.8 pm

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): May I just comment on the point of order made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown)? I was given sight of this statement 30 minutes before I entered this House. I was not given an electronic copy, I was not allowed to take one away and, as I sit here right now, I have still not been provided with a copy of the statement. I consider this absolutely reprehensible. The Secretary of State does this every single time—relying on confidentiality and market sensitivity. Every single time he treats me with contempt, Her Majesty's Opposition with contempt, and the House of Commons with contempt. It is about time he changed his ways. This is a shameful practice.

Today, the *i* newspaper reported that the millennial railcard announced in the 2017 Budget has been scrapped because the Treasury will not agree to fund it. In that case, why did the Chancellor announce it? This Government have nothing to offer that age group other than spin and broken promises.

In the past year, the Transport Secretary gifted Virgin and Stagecoach a £2 billion bail-out after they had failed on the east coast main line at the same time as awarding those same companies a lucrative contract extension on the west coast main line. Yet he has the audacity to come to the Dispatch Box and say that it is not reasonable to remove or place conditions on their passport. It is absolutely ludicrous. Three times in under a decade, private companies have failed on the east coast main line. Its only successful period was from 2009 to 2015 under public ownership, when £1 billion was returned to the Treasury. It was the best-performing operator on the network before being cynically re-privatised on the eve of the 2015 general election. The then Secretary of State for Transport said:

"I believe Stagecoach and Virgin will not only deliver for customers but also for the British taxpayer."

What nonsense! Report after report by the Public Accounts Committee, which described the Government's approach as "completely inadequate", and by the Transport Committee detail the failure of the privatised franchising system on its own terms. The Government's incompetence has been disastrous for passengers and led to misery for millions of people.

We have been here before many, many times, year after year. The Secretary of State and his predecessors have stood at the Dispatch Box and told the House that privatisation is being reformed. We have had reform, reform and reform. We have had bail-out after bail-out.

Rail companies win; passengers and taxpayers lose. There is a definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. This is the situation we find ourselves in today. Franchising remains at the heart of the alleged partnership. No amount of tinkering can solve the failings of a broken privatised system where the public take the risk and the train companies take the profit, aided and abetted by the Transport Secretary.

Can we really believe anything that the right hon. Gentleman says? Rail investment is promised; rail investment is cancelled. He makes claims about technology despite his civil servants telling him that it does not exist. No one takes his announcements seriously. Every announcement is a smokescreen to divert attention from the failures of his rail franchising policy. The east coast main line is but one vulnerable rail franchise. What about Northern, TransPennine, Greater Anglia and South Western? Will there be bail-outs for operators on those lines who fail to meet their targets?

Let us be clear about the privatised public sector operator of last resort—how ridiculous is that?—on the east coast main line. These companies—multinational Canadian engineering company SNC-Lavalin, Arup, and big-four accountancy firm Ernst and Young—are not running the east coast main line for nothing. This is Conservative-style public ownership—more private profit. Only Labour's version of public ownership will deliver what the railway needs.

There is a clear solution to the problems on the east coast main line. It was a successful public company between 2009 and 2014, thanks to the previous Labour Government. I am just sorry that the Secretary of State will not accept the stark staringly obvious answer: an integrated railway under public ownership, run for passengers, not for profit.

**Chris Grayling:** The first thing to say is that I could have done what has been done previously and made a stock market announcement at 7 am this morning, and not come to the House first. I actually chose on this occasion to come to the House first to provide the information, albeit price sensitively, in the best possible way. I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman does not believe that that is a more appropriate way to handle such an issue than making a 7 am announcement to the stock market, as has been past practice.

The hon. Gentleman talks about nationalisation. Let us deal with this issue head on. Labour has spent the past few months desperately trying to take us back into the ambit of the European Union. Let me explain this to him very simply: his policy on rail nationalisation is illegal under European law. It is all well and good Labour Members arguing that we should stay in the single market and have a second referendum and all the rest of it, but his version of nationalisation is not legal under European law, so why would we take him seriously when he talks about this? I am interested in what works, and that is what we are doing with today's announcement.

The hon. Gentleman harks back to the period of public operation of this railway. During that period, fewer staff were employed, it generated less money for the taxpayer, and passenger satisfaction was lower than it was subsequently. So it was not some great nirvana period. Yes, things were done in a way that moved things beyond the collapse of National Express in 2009,

but the performance of the team currently running the railway has been good. It is not their fault that the parent company got its sums wrong. We should pay tribute to the team who work on that railway and say that it is not their fault that I have had to make today's announcement.

The hon. Gentleman keeps going on about a £2 billion announcement. That is another example of why Labour does not understand any of this, because otherwise he would realise that no bail-out has taken place, any more than Labour bailed out National Express. This railway line is continuing and will continue to make a substantial contribution to the taxpayer. When he talks about a £2 billion bail-out, he does not understand the finances of the railway. It is not true today and it was not true when National Express collapsed. The reality is that this is the best way to take forward what has been a difficult situation on this railway on a path that I believe in and I think the public believe in: it is better to bring back the operation of track and train, and that is what we will do.

The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the railcard having been scrapped. That would justify his not believing everything he reads in the papers.

**Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con):** I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. As I understand it, with the formation of LNER there is no bail-out and nor is there any renationalisation, which will be widely welcomed. On the basis that taxpayer value has been protected, will he say what extra investment might be available to LNER, whether there will be opportunities for private sector investment and whether he will open up the line to open-access competition?

**Chris Grayling:** The latter point is really important. We want open access to continue. This line has some excellent open-access operators. The system we are putting in place will do nothing to preclude that from happening. I am very clear that that has to continue and that the interests of both the open-access operators and the freight companies needs to be protected as we take this forward. I assure my hon. Friend that that is what will happen.

I want to continue to see private investment in our railways. The Labour approach would mean that each year the railways were competing for public capital with schools, education and the rest. That is something that Labour Members do not quite understand. The railway gets more investment through a partnership between the public sector and the private sector than ever it would through their renationalisation policy. Going back to the days of decline and failure under British Rail is their way for the future. We just have to look at what is happening in France, where people are desperate to move away from that model because it is not working.

**Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** Let us go back to 2012 and look at the failed west coast main line franchise. Back then, when Virgin was going to lose out, it was happy to go to court. It ran a public campaign—"Keep Virgin on the west coast". Oh, how it squealed; we were to feel sorry for it. What happened? Yes, it got a direct award. Returning to the here and now, it gets to walk away from this franchise—no harm,

[Alan Brown]

no foul. We do not hear it squealing now. It is an absolutely sick joke. Virgin should not be allowed to bid for future franchises.

On this franchise, it is not just Virgin Trains East Coast that got its sums wrong. We keep hearing about how it got its sums wrong, but that means that the Department for Transport got its sums wrong when it assessed the tenders. Where is the due diligence? What is going to happen within the Department to make sure that it does not make the same mistakes in future? What about the other consortiums that lost out if VTEC got its sums wrong? Do they now have grounds to go to court having missed out because the Government awarded the franchise to a company and now just blithely say, "Oh, it got its sums wrong. Don't worry about it—that's what happens with some franchises. They get their sums wrong, and we move on and re-tender."

Will Virgin and Stagecoach be allowed to bid for the new partnership? That really would be rubbing salt into the wounds of this process. Richard Branson has blamed Network Rail. He says, "It's not our fault, gov—it's Network Rail." What is the truth in this? How much of this problem has been caused by Network Rail, and is that going to be sorted out? Will the Secretary of State please devolve Network Rail to Scotland, so that at least the Scottish Government can take care of these matters in Scotland? The current system cost an extra £60 million last year. He says that this is not a failing railway and that Virgin and Stagecoach are reliable. In fact, what we have is a failing Government.

**Chris Grayling:** If we want to find a failing Government, we just need to look north of the border. I do not plan to devolve responsibility for Network Rail to the Scottish Government because I do not believe the Scottish Government are capable of overseeing it properly. They are messing up education and health in Scotland. They should concentrate on doing the things they already have right before they take on any extra powers.

The hon. Gentleman talks about there being no harm to Virgin-Stagecoach. It has just lost 20% of its market capital. Most people running a business would say that that is a pretty big blow. It is not happy about that, and nor will any of its shareholders be. We have changed our approach since this franchise was let. There are new risk-sharing mechanisms in place. Most recently, we did not accept the highest bid for the last franchise we awarded, and we have to continue to work on this. I have asked my hon. Friend the Minister of State, who is the rail Minister, to work closely with colleagues in the Treasury to identify the best way to ensure that we have the right risk-sharing mechanisms for the future, so that we look after the interests of passengers and the taxpayer.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the new partnership and the bids. This is a completely different paradigm. This is not another franchise bid in two years. We are looking at shaping a different kind of railway, and we will set out plans for that to the House in due course.

**Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that all planned investment in the line will continue and that the extension of direct services to Middlesbrough will be unaffected?

**Chris Grayling:** I have every intention of continuing to meet the commitments to new services in the original VTEC document. The only complication that has arisen is around engineering works by Network Rail and when those take place, but there is no intention to withdraw any future service plans. Most will be able to start on time in 2019. A small number may be delayed beyond that, but that will be for reasons outside the control of the train operator.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): In November 2014, the then Secretary of State promised that the new franchise awarded to Virgin-Stagecoach would run for eight years and return £3.3 billion in premium payments to the taxpayer. He said:

"These figures are robust and have been subject to rigorous scrutiny, including by independent auditors."—[*Official Report*, 27 November 2014; Vol. 588, c. 1080.]

The Secretary of State must take responsibility for this serious repeat failure. If Virgin-Stagecoach got its figures wrong, so did his Department, and he should apologise to passengers and taxpayers for that failure. The Transport Committee will be subjecting this failure to detailed scrutiny, but what does the decision today mean for other franchises that we know are struggling to meet their obligations?

**Chris Grayling:** There is no other franchise today in the same position. We are seeing some changed patterns of ridership on the railways. For example, people are choosing to travel to work three or four days a week and work from home one day a week, and we are doing careful work on what that means for the future. As I said, my hon. Friend the rail Minister is working on that very issue and any implications for the future of franchising. The reality, as I keep saying, is that this railway has continued to deliver a higher contribution to the taxpayer and a higher level of customer satisfaction than it did prior to 2014.

**Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): For the residents of Berwick-upon-Tweed, the east coast main line is critical infrastructure, until the Secretary of State manages to dual the rest of the A1 all the way through. Can he confirm that there will be no disruption and that my constituents will be able to continue using what has always been an excellent train line?

**Chris Grayling:** I can give that commitment. I hope that it will become an even more excellent train line, though passengers may be tempted away, as tomorrow I will do the formal opening of the last link of motorway-grade road between London and Newcastle—something that should have happened a long time ago but did not happen in the 13 years when the Labour party was in power. It is this Government who are bringing better transport services to the north-east.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): This is the third time that a private franchise on this line has failed. The Secretary of State just told the House that when it is fully formed, the new LNER operation will be a partnership between the public and private sectors. Can he clarify that, until that time, it will in effect be a publicly run service? If so, he could have made a considerably shorter statement if he had just got up and said, "For the time being, I am renationalising the east coast main line."

**Chris Grayling:** It will be a publicly run service, and over the next two to three years, we will be developing the new model of the future. As I say, the operator of last resort is a publicly run service—so, yes, it will be, and we will be making the transition to the new arrangements over that period.

**Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con):** Further to the Secretary of State's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), he will know that extra services between London and Shipley and Bradford are scheduled to operate from next year onwards. What reassurance can he give that those extra services will operate? Can he ensure that Network Rail privatises the work required, so that those extra services are in operation on time, because they are very important to the local economy in the Bradford district?

**Chris Grayling:** My recollection is that the Bradford services and the ones going through my hon. Friend's constituency are due to start next year, and I know of no reason why that should not happen.

**Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab):** As has been said, three private companies have run the east coast main line, and they have all failed, except for the one that was disposed of by the last Government under the previous Transport Secretary. I wonder sometimes whether we should look at the current Secretary of State's slush bucket and see how much Stagecoach put into it.

**Chris Grayling:** That suggestion is not worthy of an hon. Member of this House. The hon. Gentleman knows that decisions about procurement are taken predominantly by officials, and I regret the fact that he has made such an allegation.

**Mr Speaker:** Forgive me, but I do not know whether it was an allegation. It happened very quickly, and I did not deem it in any way to be disorderly. I will look at the record later, but the hon. Gentleman has made his point and the Secretary of State has responded to it.

**Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con):** I suspect the Secretary of State is of a similar age to me and therefore remembers the last time our railways were nationalised. Is he therefore bemused by the somewhat romantic image that the Labour party portrays of what the railways were like? My recollection is that they were dirty, inefficient and nearly always late, not to mention the terrible sandwiches. They were a far cry from the modern and efficient railways we have today, thanks to private investment. Most of our challenges now are a result of rapid growth in passenger numbers.

**Chris Grayling:** We do not even have to look back to the days of British Rail. We just have to look across the channel to a railway that is heavily indebted, where there are threats of line closures, where the leadership of our friends in the French Government are saying that it simply is not acceptable to carry on the way they are and where they are looking to take their railway in the direction of ours and not the other way round.

**Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab):** Franchising on this line has failed repeatedly. The Secretary of State could make himself incredibly popular in my constituency, which is the birthplace of the railways, if he just stood up, looked behind him and said, "My name is Chris Grayling, and I have just nationalised a rail line."

**Chris Grayling:** I have just explained why I do not think nationalisation of our railways is the long-term answer: we just have to look across the channel and see the chaos there to understand that a trip back to the days of British Rail is not right for the future of the travelling public in this country, however much Opposition Members might want it.

**John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con):** I have been working closely with the Rail Action Group, East of Scotland to reopen stations at Reston and East Linton. In the light of today's announcement and given the impact that the operation of the east coast main line has on those stations, will the Secretary of State meet me and the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) to discuss those projects and how the east coast main line might be able to progress them further?

**Chris Grayling:** I would be happy to do that. I want to see services on this route develop, and I want to see new destinations and new kinds of service. Of course, once High Speed 2 opens, there will be an opportunity for a whole raft of new services on this route, because of all the extra capacity that will be freed up.

**Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD):** I wonder whether I could first address the point of order. Correct me if I am wrong, but I think the Secretary of State said that all Opposition parties had been informed of the contents of the statement before we came into the Chamber. That was not the case for my party. We had no notification at all, other than an email with a heading saying that there would be a statement. We did not receive an electronic notification until two minutes past 1 o'clock, when we were all already in the Chamber. Could the Secretary of State comment on that?

The Government cannot simply go on bailing out failing rail franchises. There will be a knock-on effect on other rail franchises, and what are other companies to do if there is a further reduction in economic growth and they are finding it difficult? Are the Government going to bail out every one of them, or will they take the opportunity to look at how public ownership works in this case and examine the future of the railways?

**Chris Grayling:** I will make two points. The custom and practice is to provide an advance copy of a statement to Her Majesty's Opposition. It has also been the custom in recent years to provide one to the third party. Both of those were done this morning, so I have followed conventions as per normal.

The hon. Lady talks about bailing out a private franchise. I have not bailed out any private franchise; I have just taken away its contract.

**Andy McDonald:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We will come to points of order—*[Interruption.]* Order. Calm! I commend yoga to the shadow Secretary of State. I will happily take the hon.

[Mr Speaker]

Gentleman's point of order at the end but not in the middle of the statement. I will wait with eager anticipation, bated breath and beads of sweat upon my brow to hear his point of order at the appropriate moment, and I am sure I will hear it.

I was in the process of calling somebody from the Government side—Mr Iain Stewart.

**Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that nothing he has announced today will affect the investment in new rolling stock and the introduction of the new Azuma trains on the east coast main line? In the spirit of cross-party co-operation, may I give him a cheer for reintroducing the LNER brand back into our railways? LNER was one of the four great private railway companies that developed our railways in the last century.

**Chris Grayling:** I give my hon. Friend an assurance that the Azuma trains will be joining the network later this year. They will deliver a fantastic new service for passengers, and they will indeed be LNER Azuma trains instead.

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that he was not aware of any problems with other franchises. Perhaps he was not in the House during Prime Minister's questions, when problems with the Northern franchise were identified. Private companies are walking away from franchise bids in Wales and the east midlands. Is this not clear evidence that the rail franchising model is broken, and that the answer is a truly integrated railway under public ownership?

**Chris Grayling:** First, the number of firms asking for passports to apply for franchises is actually increasing, not decreasing. As I keep explaining to Opposition Members—they are causing as much trouble as they can for the Government over the European Union, instead of working together in the interests of this country—what they are proposing is illegal under European law.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for taking this tough decision and bringing forward his plan for a public-private partnership for the east coast main line. Will he confirm what this decision will mean for the customer experience before and after 24 June? What will be the travelling public's experience as a result of this decision?

**Chris Grayling:** The travelling public are the most important people in all this. Tomorrow, and indeed on 25 June, they should notice no difference to the timetable or the tickets; they can buy tickets in advance. The difference is that from that point on they will notice a change to the trains, which will become LNER livery trains. Later this year, there will of course be brand-new LNER livery trains, providing a much better experience for the travelling public—and a more reliable experience at that.

**Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): The Secretary of State said in his statement that there is "no suggestion of either malpractice or malicious intent in what has

happened." Does he agree with me that what has happened smacks of a pattern of failure and incompetence, and that he, as the Secretary of State, should take responsibility?

**Chris Grayling:** Clearly the Government have to act in a situation like this, and we have done so: we have acted decisively. The reality is—I stand by what I said—that there is no malicious intent. A major corporation has made a major mistake, and it has paid a price equivalent to a fifth of its market capitalisation, which is a big cost for any business.

**John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), who asked about open access. The Secretary of State was clear that open-access services will be maintained, but may I ask him to go further? In preparing for the end of the current deals in 2021, may I ask him, instead of going back to a failed nationalisation model or indeed of relying on the evident fragility of the franchising model, to consider greatly extending open-access rail to cover the entire line once the current deals are over?

**Chris Grayling:** I know my hon. Friend is a great believer in open access, and I think that this line proves that it can make a real difference. I give him an assurance that we will do all we can to continue to encourage open access to maximise the capacity of the railway network.

**John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): The voters along the east coast main line in England were the strongest voters in the country for Brexit, and when they voted to leave the European Union, they, including my constituents, did not vote to give away the benefits that will come from it. They saw one of the big benefits of that vote as the ability to nationalise the rail industry. Why is this Secretary of State snubbing those Brexit voters and kicking them in the teeth?

**Chris Grayling:** I know we have travellers on this line who believe they are getting a better service than they have before, and I believe that most of them would agree with me that reuniting track and train is the best way of delivering performance. This is not actually about ownership. If a railway has operational challenges or is operating at capacity, it does not matter who owns or controls it, as the problem is still going to remain. If it were taken back into the public sector and then starved of capital, as would inevitably happen, we would end up with a railway that did less well for the future.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's reconfirmation of the break-up of the Govia Thameslink Railway franchise in 2021, and also the £300 million of engineering investment that is going in, but will he please re-emphasise that the company must make sure that bus replacement services are not stranding passengers during periods of engineering work?

**Chris Grayling:** I am aware of the issue at Gatwick the weekend before last. My understanding is that the problem was relatively short lived, but lessons have to be learned from that incident, just as they particularly had to be learned from the previous one. The company needs to get this right. The engineering work has to be done, but we cannot leave people stranded in massive queues on a Sunday as a result.

**Fiona Onasanya** (Peterborough) (Lab): Three times in under a decade private companies have failed the east coast main line. It was successfully managed by a public company between 2009 and 2015. Why will the Secretary of State not accept that obvious solution to the problems faced by the east coast main line?

**Chris Grayling:** I do not believe that that is the long-term answer. We are actually taking the line back into state control now. The whole point is that, during those years, the railway contributed less to the public purse, had lower levels of satisfaction and employed fewer people than it does today, and there must be a lesson in that as well.

**Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is the involvement of private companies through the private-public partnerships managing our railways that has helped to foster more competitiveness, particularly in relation to services and ticket prices?

**Chris Grayling:** That is right. I cannot understand why the Labour party is so fixated on recreating British Rail just at the time when our friends in France are going to step away from that model and actually move closer to where we are. That is Emmanuel Macron's vision to create a better railway. The Labour party seems to want to go in exactly the opposite direction and to return to a situation that the French say is not working for them.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentioned that independent members "will ensure the interests of other operators on the route are taken into account." Will this include First ScotRail, which operates the local service—it is itself operating at capacity and facing its own crises—on the east coast main line in my constituency of East Lothian?

**Chris Grayling:** We have to make sure that the new organisation—I have talked about this with the rail regulator, which has been involved since the start of developing this concept—has a duty to make sure both that space is available for other operators and that, in relation to the support and the service provided, there is no discrimination against other operators, such as regarding whether the signals work and so forth. This has to be structured in a way that protects such operators, whether in the case of First ScotRail in the north, or other operators in the midlands and the south.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I have served on the Transport Committee for the past few years, during which time we have examined the challenges that face train operators as a result of record investment in our Network Rail assets. Is it the Secretary of State's view that the issue on the east coast main line is so acute that the only way to fix the Network Rail assets is to have it all as one operating entity?

**Chris Grayling:** On a rail network that is operating absolutely at capacity all round—when there are very few, if any, spare train cars; and when anything that goes wrong is hugely disruptive to the timetable—a joint operating team that is able to plan train services and engineering works as part of that same team, rather than in two different organisations, is a much better way

to operate a railway. My vision for the east coast main line, and indeed for other parts of the rail network where we are taking steps down the same path, is to create such a joined-up approach of managing track and train together. In my view, that is the best way to make a congested railway work more effectively for passengers.

**Caroline Flint** (Don Valley) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that Stagecoach and Virgin Trains got their bid wrong, which presumably means that they undercut their competitors. Should there not be a consequence, with Virgin and Stagecoach denied the right to bid for other franchises?

**Chris Grayling:** First, there is no legal basis for taking that step. Secondly, it is interesting that the Labour Members always demand that we stop international companies getting franchises in the UK. They seem to want to drive out of the industry a company that has made a huge mistake and paid a big price for it, but which none the less has been a successful transport operator in the UK for a long time. We should take sensible decisions in the interests of the country and of passengers. That is what I am doing.

**Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): It is clear that there are unique infrastructure challenges on the east coast main line, many of which affect my constituents. What steps will the Secretary of State take to resolve those challenges, and can he assure me that the creation of the new partnership will solve them?

**Chris Grayling:** That is very much my aim. I will ask the new joined-up board to consider how we can bring digital technology to the signalling on the line. There are not enough train paths, and the way to sort that for the future is by moving to a digital railway. This is an area in which we can supplement public investment—we are putting in a record amount over the next five years—with private investment so that, for example, we unlock the potential of digital technology to create even more capacity on our railways.

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on following the advice I have been giving him in this Chamber and partially implementing Labour's 2015 transport manifesto, which I had a hand in writing, by bringing track and train closer together. I also congratulate him on his decision to bring the Great Northern line under the control of London's Mayor, thereby recreating Network SouthEast from the days of British Rail. His decision to run the railway from 24 June shows that that is legal under European law. I urge him to go further and ensure that the private sector knows there is an operator of last resort ready to step in, so that we have a public railway operated by public servants and working in the public interest.

**Chris Grayling:** I think people already know, if they did not know before, that there is an operator of last resort. The legal position, as the hon. Lady will know, is that existing European law already provides for a separation of track and train. The new European rail package that comes into force in the autumn goes further by making it illegal to let any public contract without private sector competition and a private sector alternative. That will make the Labour party's policies completely illegal.

[Chris Grayling]

What matters is what works for passengers. On bringing the operation of track and train back together, I think we both agree—I am grateful for the hon. Lady's comments. We may disagree about overall ownership structures or the overall approach to privatisation or nationalisation, but a single team operating the two will take joined-up decisions in the interests of passengers. In my view, that is the right way forward.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What was the line's contribution to the taxpayer between 2009 and 2015, and what has it been subsequently?

**Chris Grayling:** The equivalent contribution since the current franchise started is roughly—if I remember correctly; this is just from memory—£200 million more for the taxpayer. It is certainly the case that the franchise has been contributing more to the taxpayer since Virgin Trains took over than was the case when it was under state control. The Labour party always seems conveniently to forget that, but it is the truth.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): I receive daily communications from constituents who are frankly fed up with antiquated, unreliable and overcrowded trains, including, but not exclusively, on the east coast main line. The Secretary of State has long promised improvements in investment but has failed to deliver. When will he get a grip on rail in the north?

**Chris Grayling:** I keep saying to the hon. Lady that what she wants is a Government who are providing brand new trains. The first are already being introduced. On the trans-Pennine route, the completely refurbished new trains are already in operation. The first of the new-build trains are due to arrive within a matter of weeks. I expect the first Pacer trains to go to the scrapyards later this year. The new Hitachi-built trains arrive on the east coast main line later this year. The railways are about to go through the biggest transformation of their rolling stocks since the steam engine. I hope she and her constituents will welcome that.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): I know that the Secretary of State shares my view that the idea that a rebranded British Rail is the great solution for all our transport problems is faintly ridiculous. What learning from the experience of dealing with this particular franchise is being taken to the Great Western Railway, which will have a franchise soon?

**Chris Grayling:** We have to ensure that the risk-sharing mechanisms are right, which is why I have tasked the rail Minister with looking in detail at franchise contracts. On Great Western, I want a very close relationship and deep alliance—if not one step further than that—between Network Rail and the train operator. We have to ensure for all future franchises that we do not get ourselves in a position in which the franchise can fail in this way.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It looks to me like the Secretary of State's golden ministerial touch has worked again to produce a catalogue of failure: his Department's failure; the franchise agreement failing; incompetent train operators; and taxpayers and

passengers losing out yet again. Does he plan to make an announcement about a £500 million bailout of Crossrail, which was reported in the newspapers at the weekend, again adding to the disparity in investment between north and south?

**Chris Grayling:** Opposition Members keep quoting what they have read in the papers. When there are things to tell the House, I will tell the House, as I always have, Mr Speaker. I counsel Members not to just pick up newspapers.

On the disparity in investment between north and south, the flagship project for the next five years is the £2.9 billion trans-Pennine upgrade, which is by a country mile the biggest rail investment project for the next five years in the Network Rail investment programme.

**Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): The Secretary of State's statement mentions the break-up in 2021 of the Thameslink and Southern Rail franchises, but I urge him to break them up sooner rather than later. The new timetable changes affect passengers in my rural constituency, with stations at Berwick, Wivelsfield, Seaford, Lewes, Plumpton and Polegate all losing significant services. Will he bring forward the break-up of the franchise?

**Chris Grayling:** Let me touch briefly on the question of the new franchise. The big change to timetabling is not just in my hon. Friend's area, but all around the country. It is being driven by Network Rail, which ultimately controls timetabling across the network to try to make a very complicated pattern of services fit together. After 20 May, there will be some fantastic enhancements to services around the country. Some tough decisions have been taken about levels of demand and ridership. If colleagues have individual concerns, the rail Minister and I will be very happy to sit down and talk about them. This is a massive and broad change that will deliver far more for passengers.

**Lisa Nandy** (Wigan) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's decision, however reluctantly he reached it, but he seems to have no comprehension of the gravity of what is happening on our railways. Northern passengers were promised a better service when the franchise was awarded a couple of years ago, but that service is dirty, overcrowded and increasingly unreliable. That is having a major impact on our economy. Will he join me, the Mayor of Greater Manchester and cross-party MPs, and, in the public interest, step in to strip this arrogant, out-of-touch company of its franchise?

**Chris Grayling:** Let us be clear about two things. First, the Northern franchise is co-managed between Rail North—part of Transport for the North, on which the hon. Lady's northern colleagues sit—and my Department. They are delivering a massive investment programme. I would add a cautionary note. Performance issues need to be addressed and we will address them, but it would be a huge mistake to disrupt the investment programme that, over the coming months, will start the transformation of all those dirty old trains that should have been replaced a decade ago but were not. The new trains are being built. The first ones are starting to arrive and she will see a transformation that is long overdue.

**Graham P. Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State attributing all the problems on the east coast main line over the last few years to the franchise holders and none of them to his Department and him?

**Chris Grayling:** I attribute the problems on that line to two things: first, an unrealistic bid that has failed; and secondly, old rolling stock that is being replaced and an infrastructure that needs an upgrade and is going to get it. That is what has caused the operational problems—notwithstanding that, passenger satisfaction on that railway line is 92%, which I think is pretty good.

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The cross-party Public Accounts Committee said last month that the Department for Transport's forecasted earnings from the east coast franchise were wildly wrong. Given today's announcement, how can we have faith in the Secretary of State's Department's handling of it, and will he now apologise for presiding over yet another privatisation disaster on our railways?

**Chris Grayling:** What I have done is take decisive action to deal with a problem that needs to be addressed to make sure that we protect passengers. That is what everybody would expect.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): The Secretary of State is the one who wrote the letter saying that he would not hand over suburban services to a Labour Mayor of London, but in today's statement he has had to eat his words about the overground services in north-east London. In south-east London, my constituents face a worse service, with less choice of destinations as a result of the new franchise, so will he reconsider the position with regard to the Southeastern franchise and allow the Mayor of London to take it over and give a better service to my constituents?

**Chris Grayling:** The issue remains twofold. The Mayor of London's business plan for the Southeastern franchise provided virtually no new investment at all. There was a handful of extra services on the Nunhead line, and the rest of it was on a wing and a prayer. I think that the new franchise document specifying improvements for passengers will deliver, not just in London but across the whole of the Kent and south-eastern area, because this is not a London franchise.

**Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Ind): May I remind the Secretary of State of a previous experience with public-private partnership on the railways—namely that in the London underground? It was forced on the Mayor of London and Transport for London, who resisted it very strongly. The scheme collapsed in disorder, very expensively. Tube Lines and Metronet—the two private companies involved—stuffed their pockets with money before it collapsed back into the public sector. Is that not going to happen again with this scheme?

**Chris Grayling:** I remind the hon. Gentleman that that problem happened when Labour was in power, which proves that they are not good at setting up contracting arrangements.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows, because I have raised it repeatedly, about the appalling service that my constituents are

receiving from Northern Rail, with delays, cancellations, overcrowding, and trains running through stations without stopping when they should. Now the new timetable removes station stops all together. Will he finally take action to ensure that a compensation scheme that recognises the disruption that my constituents have suffered for months can actually be put in place to give them some measure of recompense for the disruption that they have suffered?

**Chris Grayling:** We continue to keep the matter under review. We are moving to Delay Repay 15 and looking at other ways of tightening performance on the railways, but the big difference to travellers in and around the Manchester area will come from the arrival of new trains and the completion of the works on the Bolton line, which have caused more disruption than I would wish. I am less than happy about the delays that have taken place and I am putting as much pressure on Network Rail as possible to get it sorted.

**Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The whole reason that we have this statement from the Secretary of State is that the current franchise arrangements are broken. I urge him, in the new franchise, to include not-for-profit and the part-nationalisation that he has announced today. That would avoid the embarrassment of a Secretary of State having to come to this House to announce that further down the line and costing taxpayers money.

**Chris Grayling:** As I keep saying in respect of what I will bring to the House in due course, as we make further progress towards the implementation of what was the east coast partnership and is now the London North Eastern Railway, this is a different paradigm, and it simply will not operate in the way the hon. Gentleman has discussed.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Given the well known but now even better publicised problems with the rail franchising model, might this not be the moment for the Secretary of State to review the Co-op party's recent proposals for rail reform, including a series of new mutual, not-for-profit train operating companies that are able to operate in the private sector, but are publicly owned, and able to attract significant private investment?

**Chris Grayling:** As I said in my statement, one of the things that I am looking at on the east coast route is how we secure significant employee participation in its success. I will look carefully at what the hon. Gentleman suggests. I think that we need a different approach. That is why the LNER model that we will be developing over the coming years will be a revolution for the railways.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that he wants to protect passenger interests and ensure value for money for taxpayers, but in Bristol, as across the country, fares have gone up three times faster than wages since 2010. He also says that he wants to support investment and improvement in the railway. We have some new stock, but we have had our electrification cancelled in Bristol, despite massive disruption for constituents in Lawrence Hill and Easton. When is he going to sort out our electrification and when will he

[Thangam Debbonaire]

accept that the favour that he has just done for the people and passengers on the east coast needs to be done for the passengers in Bristol, so that our rail service is no longer failing?

**Chris Grayling:** The hon. Lady is being a bit churlish. She is getting brand new trains for Bristol and the best ever train service to London. We are in the process of dualling the Filton Bank. We are working with the combined authority mayor for the Bristol area to develop the plans for the Bristol metro, MetroWest, which I regard as one of the most important projects for the country—[*Interruption.*] MetroWest is rail. It is going to be one of the most significant developments that Bristol has seen for a very long time, developing the kind of suburban rail network that it really needs.

## Points of Order

1.56 pm

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab) *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** I will take the point of order from the shadow Transport Secretary. We are very pressed for time as a result of the statement and the brouhaha surrounding its handling. I am keen to progress, but not before hearing the hon. Gentleman.

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you for indulging me. Words are very important. In response to the question raised by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) about the provision of the statement prior to its making, the response was that Opposition parties had been provided with a copy of the statement. That is simply not the case. I asked for a copy of the statement and I was provided with it after the Secretary of State sat down. For clarity, I had sight of it with the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) for minutes—30 minutes—before that statement started. I simply ask that the Secretary of State comes to the Dispatch Box to clarify the position and to apologise for giving the wrong impression.

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. If the Secretary of State wishes to respond, he can.

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As I indicated to you earlier, my officials provided a copy to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) so that he could prepare his response to my statement in good time—about 45 minutes, in fact, before the statement started. I judge that to be the best way of approaching what is a market-sensitive announcement, and it did not require me to do what is done, for example, on Budget day, when no advance notice is provided.

**Mr Speaker:** I think that this matter is best continued, if discussion on it is required, outside the Chamber. I have made my position clear on the subject of the statement being made today. I say this to the Secretary of State, who is not responsible for scheduling: there will be people who feel very unhappy that on a day when we have an Opposition day debate on Grenfell, which is heavily subscribed, a very substantial amount of time has been taken up, inevitably, by this statement. People will be very unhappy about that. I say to Members on the Treasury Bench that they ought to think about these matters extremely carefully from now on, because my priority is to defend the rights of the House of Commons, and I will do that against all comers. I have never been worried about the verdict of the Executive, and I am not going to start now.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State has again said that he provided copies of the statement. The Liberal Democrats asked for a briefing with him so that we could have some understanding of the statement that was going to be made, but this was refused. I gleaned my information from a reporter on the way into the Chamber, when they said to me, “You’ll be talking about trains today.”

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her attempted follow-up point of order, and I intend no discourtesy to her—she is an extremely assiduous Member of this House, but she is also a relatively new Member and therefore what I am about to say is intended in no sense as a discourtesy but as a clarification. Statements are made available to Opposition Front-Bench teams as a matter of courtesy, and in my experience that has always been extended to the principal Opposition party and ordinarily to the third party. I must emphasise to her, even if it is disappointing to her, that it is up to a Minister to determine to which Opposition parties to make the statement available. Beyond the official Opposition there are a number of Opposition parties, but that, I am afraid, is emphatically not a matter for the Chair; rather, it is for Members. I appeal to all those involved henceforth to seek to agree these matters outside the Chamber in the spirit that the House and—at least as importantly—the public expect: namely, in the spirit of mutual respect.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** On a point of order, Mr Speaker—I am sorry, I have largely lost my voice; there may be many who rejoice. I am enormously grateful to you for your statement yesterday in response to my point of order the day before. I meant no disrespect to any of the House authorities, and I do not think that anyone is attempting to mislead anybody at all, but the matter of the general data protection regulation and how it affects Members of Parliament is a complicated business. I am conscious too that the law has not fully gone through Parliament, so there are elements on which people cannot yet give solid advice, but lots of MPs have approached me over the past 24 hours concerned about what they should and should not be doing.

Members want to do the right thing by the law, but they also want to do the right thing by their constituents, and lots of staff have had the fear of God put into them

about what might happen if we get this wrong. I wonder whether you might consider, once the law has gone through Parliament, bringing in the Information Commissioner to host a session for all Members so that we can hear from the horse's mouth the clearest possible advice and thereby do the best by our constituents and by the law. I understand that political parties may be providing advice as well, but in the end we all share the same ambition, and it would be better if it were done with all Members.

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He makes a very reasonable and fair suggestion. I thank him both for making it and for doing so in the terms he has. I do not want to dwell on the matter, but I think there might have been—I am learning as we go along—some confusion as a result of differences between briefings from House officials, which will have been volunteered in good faith and with some expertise, on the one hand, and those proffered by political parties, on the other. I say that on the basis of people having told me of different briefings they have received.

Any confusion is inadvertent but nevertheless unfortunate. I cannot guarantee that the Information Commissioner would be willing to come to the House for a meeting hosted by me, because the occupant of that office does not answer to me, but it is a constructive suggestion, and yes I am happy to make that approach, and I hope it will go ahead. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is satisfied for now, on the back of yesterday, that nobody is disputing—I certainly would not—his complete honesty. There is some confusion and an argument about what is and is not the case, but he is a very distinguished parliamentarian, and I will always treat him with respect.

## **Banking (Cash Machine Charges and Financial Inclusion)**

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

2.3 pm

**Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit cash machine charges; to require banks to enable free cash withdrawals from current accounts in other circumstances; to require the Financial Conduct Authority to supervise an access to banking standard; to impose penalties for breaches of that standard; to establish a financial inclusion fund, and provide for amounts received in such penalties to be paid into that fund; and for connected purposes.

Recently LINK, which set the funding formula for ATM operators, consulted its members on proposals to reduce from 25p to 20p the interchange fee paid to ATM operators by banks when cash is withdrawn. The first phase of the cut will take place on 1 July 2018. This proposed reduction in the funding formula has led to concerns that many ATMs will become financially unviable and therefore may be forced to close or charge a fee to remain in use.

The Bill seeks to remove the option for ATMs to become fee-charging by banning fees. I take this position, first and foremost, out of principle, as I do not believe that anyone should have to pay to access their own money. However, a ban on ATM charges makes it a practical necessity that an appropriate funding formula for free-to-use ATMs be devised. In supporting this objective, the Bill seeks to provide a legal requirement for access to cash withdrawals through ATMs or other means where there is a demand for it. Such demand would be established through a full market review of the ATM network by the Payment Systems Regulator. There has been no recent review of the demand for access to cash, and as we transition towards a cashless society it is important that we fully and comprehensively establish where demand remains for cash in order to target resources effectively.

Further, the Bill would create a new access to banking standard, borrowing on the existing 2017 access to banking standards, but strengthening them by placing the enforcement of the standard within the remit of the Financial Conduct Authority, rather than the Lending Standards Board. The new standard would introduce a financial inclusion penalty for banks that fail to meet the minimum threshold, with any funds gathered being used for community reinvestment in alternative financial services.

The most concerning thing about LINK's announcement is that it did not include any consultation with the public. The only people LINK asked were its own members, three quarters of whom are the card issuers and banks that must pay the interchange fee. As a result, LINK could be accused of a conflict of interest, as the majority of those consulted had a financial incentive to see the funding formula reduced.

Owing to this failure to consult, the first major evidence gathered about the public's views has happened after the fact. Research by the consumer group Which? has found that 44% of those 1,200 members surveyed used a cashpoint at least once a week. Nine in 10 said that

access to the free-to-use network was important to their daily lives, with more than half of them describing it as essential for their day-to-day lives. Likewise, a poll of small businesses by the Federation of Small Businesses found that 59% of retail businesses felt a cash machine was useful to their business, with 50% saying their nearest free-to-access cashpoint was already over 1 km from their business.

In my own constituency, we have seen banking services gradually pushed out to the two larger towns of Rutherglen and Hamilton at either end of the constituency, with towns in the middle, such as Cambuslang, left with no bank branches. In fact, there are now more ATMs in the Houses of Parliament than in the entirety of Cambuslang main street. These reductions have a real-world impact. Among other concerns, I often hear from small businesses on Cambuslang main street that rely on small, impulse cash purchases that the ATMs have run out of cash. That has a direct impact on their day's takings, and yet their views on changes to the interchange fee have not been sought.

I accept that we are moving towards a cashless society, but we are not there yet. People budgeting on a low income, older people and those who are not as confident with advances in digital banking all stand to lose out if we force progress towards a cashless society. We know that dealing in cash costs banks money, which is why we cannot leave it to banks alone to dictate the pace of change. It must be driven by consumers. Without intervention to remove the option of ATM charges, bank branch closures and the reduction of the interchange fee will mean pay-to-use ATMs becoming the norm. We only have to look to the USA, where a similar reduction in the interchange fee has resulted in an average charge of \$5 for a withdrawal from a machine not owned by the customer's bank.

LINK accepts that it wants to reduce the overall number of ATMs and says it expects this reduction to happen in city centres, where there are large clusters of ATMs, but there is simply no way of guaranteeing this effect. With different ATM companies working to different models across the UK, it is inevitable that there will be unintended consequences, and it is people in rural communities or smaller urban towns such as the ones I represent who are most likely to lose out.

The assurances that there will be a financial inclusion programme to incentivise at-risk machines where there is not another free-to-use ATM within 1 km sounds good in theory, but there is no evidence that LINK has the capability or resources to monitor the 70,000 ATMs across the UK. Once a machine closes it can cost between £7,000 and £10,000 to have it reinstalled, meaning that once an ATM goes, it is likely that it is gone for good.

There is a high risk that LINK's strategy will fail. That risk is currently borne purely by the public, not by the banks or the network that made the decision. The Bill seeks to shift the risk away from the communities who still rely on ATMs. If there is no option for an ATM to turn pay-to-use, the onus will be on LINK and the banks to ensure that it remains financially viable using the interchange fee. Of course, that does not remove the risk that the ATM operator will close the machine altogether, which is why the Bill seeks to provide a legal requirement for access to free cash through

ATMs or other means following a market review of the network by the Payment Systems Regulator to establish demand.

The Bill also seeks to address the wider issue of how banks are serving our communities. To our great frustration, it appears that currently they can effectively do what they please when pulling out of those communities. I believe that the access to banking standard serves as a good base to shape a system to protect access to banking infrastructure, but, the Lending Standards Board does not have the powers to enforce it effectively. The Bill therefore proposes to shift the responsibility to the Financial Conduct Authority, and enable the FCA to impose a financial inclusion penalty to provide funds for communities who have been cut off by their banks.

Similar legislation in the US requires banks to provide funding for alternative financial services when they close or relocate. The financial inclusion penalty proposed in the Bill would impose a fine on a bank that does not live up to the access to banking standard, or does not take voluntary action to provide alternative services when it pulls out of a community. The penalty would extract funds that can be used to finance alternative financial infrastructure such as credit unions, banking hubs, or free-to-use ATMs.

To be blunt, ATM charges are a rip-off. Over the last few years, the public have supported banks. Their hard-earned taxes were used to bail them out. In response to that, our communities are being ripped off by the banks at every turn as they relentlessly pursue their mission to drive services online and move towards a cashless society. Society is changing, and technological advancements are to be welcomed, but we cannot leave it to the banks to do the right thing on their own.

I am pleased that the Bill has secured support from members of the three main parties in the House. Let me end by saying that, whatever happens to it after today, if we want to protect the communities whom we represent from being ripped off further, we need to take action. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will support those efforts.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Ged Killen, Alex Sobel, Gareth Snell, Stephen Doughty, Mr Paul Sweeney, Danielle Rowley, Dr David Drew, Anna Turley, Chris Stephens, Stephen Kerr, Kirstene Hair and Bill Grant present the Bill.

Ged Killen accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November and to be printed (Bill 210).*

## Opposition Day

[11<sup>TH</sup> ALLOTTED DAY]

### Grenfell Tower

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call the shadow Secretary of State to move the motion, I must advise the House that no fewer than 23 Back Benchers wish to speak in the debate, and that it is expected to conclude at approximately 4 pm. This truncation of available time is consequent on a Government statement that was made earlier today, but we are where we are. I am sure that colleagues will wish to be sensitive to each other's concerns. There will have to be a very, very tight time limit on Back-Bench speeches: apologies, but it is inevitable.

2.14 pm

**John Healey** (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes the commitments given by the Government that all survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire of 14 June 2017 would be permanently rehoused within one year, that all other tower blocks with dangerous cladding would be made safe, that councils would get the funding needed to carry out remedial work and that there would be significant reform of the current system of building regulations; and calls on the Government to make good on those commitments, to lay a report before Parliament and to make an Oral Statement by 14 June 2018 setting out how it has met those commitments and discharged its wider duties in response to that national disaster.

I am conscious of the indication that you have given to the House, Mr Speaker.

Eleven months on from the terrible fire at Grenfell Tower, we remain shocked by those searing images on the night, by 72 lost lives, and by the charred black carcass of a building that still stands. Many Members in all parts of the House, Mr Speaker, were deeply moved again by the testimony of the survivors and families whom we met when you threw open Speaker's House to Grenfell United last week. Our common commitments in the House remain absolute: to make certain that Grenfell residents have the help and the new homes that they need, to make certain that all who are culpable are held fully to account, and to make certain that any measures that are needed to ensure that such a disaster can never happen again are fully implemented.

This is a debate that we did not want to call and should not have had to call, but the House has to hear and debate what the Government are doing to honour those pledges to the Grenfell survivors and to residents in other high-rise blocks around the country. I welcome the £400 million that the Prime Minister announced during Question Time, moments before the start of the debate. Labour Members have argued for that from day one. Why on earth it has taken the Prime Minister 11 months to make such an important decision is beyond me, but I welcome it nevertheless. However, I defy anyone to say that they are satisfied when two in three of the Grenfell families are still living in hotels and temporary accommodation, when it has been confirmed that 304 other tower blocks across the country have the same suspect Grenfell-style cladding but only seven have had it removed and replaced, when more than 100 privately owned blocks have dangerous cladding and it is reported that none of it has been replaced so far, and when there may be other private blocks with suspect cladding that, 11 months on, have still not been tested.

[John Healey]

The timing of this debate is therefore important. It is also important, in part, because we expect the Government's Hackitt review of building regulations and fire safety to be published tomorrow. This is a chance for the Government to show their commitment to a complete overhaul of the failed system of building safety, and I will deal in a moment with the steps that Labour believes are necessary. Above all, however, it is a chance for the new Secretary of State to make good the other failings of his predecessor, and our motion calls on him to report to Parliament sometime before the anniversary of the fire on 14 June to explain exactly how the Government have done that.

Let me deal first with the rehousing of Grenfell residents. From day one, the Government backed Kensington and Chelsea Council to do the job. On 18 December last year, the then Secretary of State told the House:

"I am confident that the council is capable of that".—[*Official Report*, 18 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 773.]

The council promised residents:

"We are committed to rehousing you to permanent social housing within twelve months."

However, 11 months on, only one in three of the families are living in a permanent new home. No one wants to bring up children in a hotel room, and residents tell us about the defects in the properties that they have been offered: properties with damp and leaks, properties without enough bedrooms, properties that are not properly furnished, and tenancy terms that are different from those that they had in the tower.

The Government could have stepped in—should have stepped in—at any point in the last 11 months, both to help to make the homes that were needed directly available and to send in commissioners to help to run the council when it was clearly failing. They could have acted at any point, but they did not. I hope that when the Secretary of State responds to the debate, he will not give the same answers that we have heard for 11 months, and I hope that he will act to accelerate the pace of help and rehousing for the Grenfell families.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Constituents of mine observed that in the immediate aftermath, in the complete absence of any visible presence of representatives of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea or any sort of officialdom, it was people power—mosques, voluntary organisations and the like—that stepped into the void, along with, eventually, the London Borough of Ealing and SportActive, whose members you hosted in your rooms yesterday, Mr Speaker, and which runs the Westway sports and fitness centre. Does that not underline the need for better inter-agency and inter-borough partnerships should such a disaster ever befall us again?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and to be fair to Ministers some of them, like me and other Members, were down in Kensington very soon after the fire, and were overwhelmed by the good will there and the response of the community and the volunteers who came from all parts of the country. But Ministers were also embarrassed, as they conceded, by how poor and slow Kensington and Chelsea was from day one. I pay tribute to other councils, particularly London borough councils, that have since sent in good people to help try to get that bad council to do the job properly.

Let me turn to other tower blocks, because there are 65 local authority areas around the country with at least one block that has failed the safety test, is non-compliant, is unsafe and is unlawful. Directly after the fire, on 17 June, the Prime Minister caught the mood of the country and promised:

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

But 11 months on, when more than 300 other tower blocks have this same dangerous Grenfell-style cladding but just seven have had it removed and replaced, things are not working.

We have thousands of families living in homes with unsafe materials tacked to the side, thousands of people buying and renting homes in these tower blocks, and others trying to sell their flats and finding that they are worthless or that their landlord turns around to them as leaseholders and says, "You've got to pay all the costs."

I say to the Secretary of State that when people's lives are at risk, it is the Government's clearcut duty to get all suspect buildings tested and all the work done to make them safe, but that is not happening. For 11 months Ministers have refused to ensure that private block owners, not residents or leaseholders, pay for the urgent work that must be done; they have refused to release the location, ownership, and safety testing status of other high-rise blocks so that residents know where they stand; they have refused to confirm what materials are safe, meaning that landlords who have taken off cladding do not know what to put back up; and they have refused—until today, under Labour pressure—to help fund vital safety work in social housing blocks. Even now they have refused to fund what we and fire chiefs say is necessary to ensure safety: the retrofitting of sprinklers in all high-risk high-rise blocks. Only Ministers can make that happen, and the new Secretary of State has the chance to act where his predecessor would not and make good on the Prime Minister's pledge of 17 June.

Finally, let me turn to the Hackitt review of building regulations, which is due tomorrow and has already been briefed to many people, including the press it seems.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman mentions compelling landlords to carry out remedial work to blocks with inappropriate cladding on the outside, and I understand the imperative and rationale behind that, but where there is not a contractual obligation on the landlord to do that—where the building is occupied by long lease holders—by what mechanism would he force them to have that work carried out?

**John Healey:** The hon. Gentleman serves on the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government, and he puts his finger on an important question that only the Government can deal with. Are the powers to require testing clear? Are the powers of enforcement on landlords who will not do the right thing—will not test or will not make their building safe when it is confirmed as having suspect cladding—in place? There are question marks over that, and it is part of the action that the Secretary of State must now take. I also say to the hon. Gentleman that the principle of councils having the power to step in to take control or confiscate buildings where landlords are not doing what

is required and they have had notice to do that is exactly the same principle that the Select Committee that he is a member of recommended in cases where private property owners are breaking the law and will not do what they are required to do and requested to do by local councils. The recommendation is that councils are then given the power to step in and do the work for them.

**Kevin Hollinrake** *rose—*

**John Healey:** I will not give way again, because of the pressure on time.

We welcomed the interim Hackitt review in December because it clearly set out the comprehensive failings in the current system of building checks and controls. The warnings were there in 2013 in coroners' reports to Ministers after two previous fatal high-rise fires, but Grenfell, and Hackitt's interim review, confirm that nothing less than a root and branch reform of the current failed system is required. So I am concerned by reports that the Hackitt review will stop well short of that, but the new Secretary of State has the chance in today's debate to make clear his standards for the new rules that are needed. The Opposition know that only an end-to-end overhaul of the system will make sure that people's homes are safe, including ensuring that only non-combustible material is used for cladding and insulation on high-rise blocks—

**Kevin Hollinrake** *indicated assent.*

**John Healey:** The hon. Gentleman is nodding strongly in agreement with that. The overhaul must also include a ban on desktop studies, which currently allow building materials to be deemed safe without a basis in testing; full disclosure of the location, ownership and testing status of all high-rise blocks; clear powers, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, for councils to enforce testing and the work that might be required; a publicly accountable system of building control; a presumption that private block owners are, as the Government have argued, responsible for paying to replace dangerous cladding; and tougher sanctions, including the backstop power for councils to take over a block where property owners are breaking the law and putting people's lives at risk by not making their buildings safe.

For 11 months, Ministers have been off the pace in their response to Grenfell Tower, failing to act with enough urgency on almost every front. The next month, before the anniversary of the fire, is when the Government must finally make good on their promises to the Grenfell residents and to the country.

2.27 pm

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire):** When I was appointed to my new role, I was clear that one of my biggest priorities was supporting everyone affected by the unimaginable tragedy at Grenfell Tower and ensuring that we learn from it so that nothing like this can ever happen again. That is why one of the first things I did was meet some of the bereaved and survivors as soon as I could, and why I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this important debate.

Today we are also remembering those who died and were injured in the Ronan Point disaster 50 years ago. This feels especially poignant as we prepare to mark the

first year since the Grenfell fire next month. These milestones will be extremely painful for those who have suffered so much, and I know that the thoughts of everyone in this House will be with them. With our focus today on the terrible events at Grenfell, I want to take this opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to helping them rebuild their lives as we remember their loved ones. In doing so, I want to pay tribute to the incredible way in which the community itself has come together to support and comfort one another, and to thank local charities and other groups who have been on the ground from the very beginning.

In the fire's aftermath, our immediate priority was, quite rightly, to support those affected, with Government Departments and public services pulling together and playing their part to offer help with everything from business support to advice on benefits. This includes vital work by the NHS and voluntary sector organisations to offer emotional and mental health support to over 6,000 people. The dedicated NHS Grenfell helpline also remains available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In total, over £46 million of national Government funds have already been spent to support recovery following the Grenfell Tower fire, and we have committed to spend a further £34 million. This includes funding for rehousing, new mental health services, investment in the Lancaster West estate, and a new community space.

As the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) has fairly flagged up this afternoon, one of the most urgent issues has been rehousing people who lost their homes. The latest figures from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, which is responsible for finding these new homes, show that of the 210 households that need to be rehoused, 201—over 95%—have accepted offers of temporary or permanent accommodation. Of these, 138 households have moved in—64 into temporary accommodation and 74 into permanent accommodation—so while progress has been made, there is no question but that this has been too slow. As a result, some households will still be in emergency accommodation in June.

It was always going to be a challenge to respond to an unprecedented tragedy on this scale. It has taken time to purchase suitable homes and to adapt and refurbish them to meet people's needs and the highest safety standards, but this is clearly not good enough, and it is understandable that the community will feel disappointed and let down. I, too, am very concerned, especially to see people who have accepted an offer of a permanent home still living in emergency accommodation. I am therefore establishing at pace what further action could be taken, by the Government or by the council, to speed up this process. The council now has more than 300 properties available to those who need them, and my Department will continue to work with it to ensure that people are given whatever support they need to be rehoused as swiftly as possible. This is part of the wider work we are undertaking to ensure that, after a slow and confused initial response to the fire, the council is delivering better support to those affected and rebuilding trust.

**Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab):** Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that this Government will be judged on actions, not words? I stood in this Chamber and asked his predecessor for a timescale for those residents

[Karen Lee]

being permanently rehoused. If we are not going to do it within a year, will the Secretary of State give me a timescale within which it will happen?

**James Brokenshire:** The fairest answer I can give to the hon. Lady is that we obviously want to see that happen as soon as possible. That is why I have made my comments about assessing what further steps can be taken with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea at pace to establish what further support can be given. I spoke to the leader of the council yesterday on this very point, and I will certainly continue to do so in the days ahead.

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** Kensington and Chelsea has had 11 months and it has failed terribly to deliver for the survivors of the Grenfell fire. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is now time for him to send in the commissioners?

**James Brokenshire:** I would say to the hon. Lady that we set up the independent taskforce and put it in to support and challenge the council to deliver an effective long-term recovery plan with local people at its heart. That was an important intervention that we took, and the taskforce's valuable work so far has highlighted the need for the council to do more to listen to the local community. We in the Government have been playing our part to make this happen through the important work of my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing, and, of course, that of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Grenfell victims, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service. He has helped to ensure that the voices and views are heard right across Government and are at the centre of decision making about the future of the site.

**Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab):** People who are familiar with the area will not underestimate the difficulty of rehousing people, because they perhaps understand it better than some in the Government have done—hence the Prime Minister's three-week target. If I understand the Secretary of State correctly, only a third of those in need have been permanently rehoused. I think he needs to say a bit more, given that there is a finite number of people and that Government and council resources are available, about how he is going to ensure that everyone is satisfactorily and permanently rehoused within a fixed time.

**James Brokenshire:** As I said earlier when I relayed the figures, nine people have not accepted an offer. I know that the council is doing work at pace with its contractors to ensure that the necessary work is undertaken to enable people to move into those homes. I know that that is what the hon. Gentleman would wish to see, and it is also what I would wish to see. That is why I have made the point about working with the council to challenge, to pressure and to see what support can be given to it, if need be, to make that process speedier. This is a question of having the contractors there and doing the practical work to ensure that the necessary improvements and modifications are made to those homes. That is absolutely at the heart of the work that we continue to support the council with.

**Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab):** Will the Secretary of State say more about the situation for Grenfell survivors who are in temporary accommodation? As a London MP, I know that this London housing crisis means that people are living in temporary accommodation for years rather than months. If that turns out to be the situation for Grenfell survivors, it will add a further injustice to the tragedy that they have already faced. That issue needs to be addressed upfront with a plan for the permanent rehousing of those residents who are now in temporary accommodation.

**James Brokenshire:** I absolutely hear the point that the hon. Lady is making about the need to see families moved from temporary to permanent accommodation. We need to ensure that the necessary homes are there, and to work carefully and sensitively with the families to ensure that they are confident and comfortable with making that step. We need to be guided in part by those families, and we need to support and work with the council to do all that we can to ensure that those homes are available.

The wishes of those affected by these terrible events are also central to the ongoing public inquiry, which was debated in Westminster Hall earlier this week. On Friday, the Prime Minister announced her decision to appoint two further panel members to sit with the chairman, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, on phase 2 of the public inquiry's work. They will help to ensure that the inquiry has the breadth of skills and expertise it requires and, I hope, provide reassurance to the bereaved, the survivors and the wider community.

The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne touched on the Hackitt review. The Grenfell fire has raised wider questions about building safety. That is why last year, my predecessor—now the Secretary of State for the Home Department—and the then Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), commissioned Dame Judith Hackitt to carry out an independent review of building regulations and fire safety. In December, she published her interim report. This showed that there is a need for significant reform of the regulatory system and for a change in culture in the construction and fire safety industries. The Government accepted Dame Judith's findings and we are implementing the recommendations in the interim report that relate to us.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I sit on the Select Committee that took evidence from Dame Judith Hackitt. We had concerns about her interim findings, and we had correspondence with her following that session in which she admits, in relation to building regulations:

“There is currently a choice between using products of limited combustibility or undergoing a full-system test”.

She goes on to say that

“the former is undoubtedly the low-risk option.”

Could we even conceive of a situation in which we would not take the lowest-risk option in that regard?

**James Brokenshire:** Dame Judith will be publishing her report tomorrow. I appreciate some of the questions that have been raised with me, and the point that my hon. Friend has just made. I think it is right that we should see the report when it is published, and I intend

to make a statement to Parliament to allow further questioning on it. I am conscious of the timeliness of this debate and of the need for others to participate in it.

It is essential that work should proceed at pace. To that end, we offered financial flexibilities such as additional borrowing to local authorities last year, and we have been listening to what social sector landlords have been telling us about the cost of removing aluminium composite material—ACM—cladding systems. We know that the expense involved means that social landlords are having to take decisions about how to prioritise important services, repairs and maintenance work, and new supply. That is why, as the Prime Minister announced earlier, the Government will fully fund the removal and replacement of dangerous cladding by councils and housing associations, with costs estimated at around £400 million. This will ensure that local authorities and housing associations can focus their efforts on making cladding systems safe for the buildings that they own.

**Jack Dromey** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State. In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, the Prime Minister promised that all the necessary assistance would be given to ensure that tenants were safe. In Birmingham, there are 213 tower blocks—10,000 households—and the West Midlands fire service has recommended a range of measures, including the retrofitting of sprinklers, but not a single penny has yet been forthcoming. As a matter of urgency, will the Secretary of State look into the repeated representations that have been made by Birmingham City Council for the necessary financial assistance to ensure that the city's tenants are safe?

**James Brokenshire**: This announcement is all about providing financial support to ensure that the works can be carried out swiftly. If the hon. Gentleman has specific points about Birmingham City Council, I will certainly look into them, and if I need to add anything else, I will certainly do so.

Right hon. and hon. Members will be aware that I updated the House by way of a written statement, as promised, on our investigations into the failure of a fire door at Grenfell Tower. To reiterate, our independent expert panel has said that the risk to public safety remains low. However, we have informed the manufacturer's customers about the performance issues with such doors and have advised building owners about the action that they should take. My Department will continue to work with the sector to consider what further support building owners may need to address any issues quickly.

We also need to improve building safety and rebuild public confidence in the system, and issues have been raised about the need to listen to residents and understand the experiences of people in living social housing, which is why we will shortly bring forward a social housing Green Paper to look at how well social housing is serving those who depend on it.

In conclusion, 71 people died last June in the greatest loss of life in a fire in a century, and a 72nd resident from the tower passed away earlier this year. The toll on those who survived and the wider community was also on a scale unseen. I am determined that we will not falter in our support for them or in our efforts to find

the answers they need and deserve. There is still much to do, and I hope that Members across the House will work with us to deliver a legacy that is truly worthy of the Grenfell community—a legacy that never forgets what happened and one that ensures that no other community has to go through what they endured.

**Mr Speaker:** I am as grateful to the Secretary of State as I was to his shadow for his commendable brevity.

2.42 pm

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Scottish National party is pleased to add its support to this Opposition day motion. From the outset, we have urged that no stone should be left unturned in ascertaining the causes of this terrible tragedy, ensuring that appropriate lessons are learned and, most important of all, seeking justice for the families of the victims and for the survivors. I am particularly grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for facilitating the meeting with survivors and relatives of the dead in your rooms last week. It was of huge assistance to parliamentarians such as myself to meet those people, and no one could fail to be impressed by their immense dignity and by the strength of the campaign that they have fought so far. I was particularly privileged to meet the husband of the 72nd victim.

The evidence to suggest that the deaths could have been avoided is mounting and compelling. I know that this is a matter for the inquiry, but it bears mentioning again today that we know from newspaper reports that costed proposals to fit the tower with panels that would not burn were apparently dropped amid pressure to cut corners on costs. We also know from the Grenfell Action Group's blog that the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation had been repeatedly warned that Grenfell Tower was a potential deathtrap. I look forward to the inquiry reporting on those matters in due course, but as I said in the Westminster Hall debate earlier this week, it is a disgrace that it has taken 11 months of campaigning by the bereaved and the survivors to wring from the Prime Minister a concession that a special panel should advise the judge at the inquiry. That should have been a no-brainer in the light of the Macpherson inquiry, and it is ridiculous that it has taken so long to get to that stage.

In Westminster Hall, I also addressed other issues relating to the legalities of the inquiry, so I will not repeat them because I want to ensure that there is time for everyone to speak today. However, I will endorse what Shelter said about the disaster. The charity said that we need a national conversation about some of the broader issues of policy and about our society that the tragedy has highlighted, particularly the role of the management organisation and wider issues around the treatment of social housing and its tenants. We also need to know that the Government will deliver on some of the promises that have already been made. In Westminster Hall on Monday, as today, there were many fine words, but the reality is that this Government have three times let their pals at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea get away with breaking their promises about rehousing, which is an absolute disgrace. Those broken promises did not just happen in a void; they occurred against a background of previous broken promises and failings.

**Clive Lewis** (Norwich South) (Lab): It is quite right that the Secretary of State highlighted housing, as have many Opposition Members, and housing and the lack of it are of great concern. However, I also hear that many families are failing to get access to the essential mental health services that they need after the disaster. Will the hon. and learned Lady comment on that?

**Joanna Cherry:** Again, it is a no-brainer that these people need immediate access to the best mental health services that public money can provide. If, as seems likely, none of this should ever have happened in the first place, and if the responsibility lies at the door of the state, there will be all the more pressure on the state to provide the necessary services.

I am conscious of the time pressures today, so I will not say much about the position in Scotland other than that building standards are devolved. Scotland has stricter building regulations in relation to some of these matters, but the Scottish Government are not complacent and have set up a ministerial working group that has made some important announcements.

I really want to spend some time discussing social housing, which is the big issue that comes out of all this. It is not for the inquiry but for this House and this Parliament to address the problems relating to a lack of social housing in England—I am not sure about Wales. As I have said, it is a disgrace that the promises to rehouse people have been broken because there is not enough housing available to rehouse them in the community that belongs to them and in which they grew up. What is the Secretary of State going to do about those broken promises? In my view—some of the survivors think the same—deadlines should now be set, and if the council cannot meet them, it should be put into special measures. This tragedy has raised profound concerns about how social housing is provided and managed in England, and Parliament needs to look at that.

When I met survivors and the bereaved, they told me that they were sickened and angered by the stigma attached to social housing. They said, “We are not poor people. We work hard and contribute to society. All we want is somewhere affordable to live in our own community. Is that really too much to ask?” I direct that question at the Secretary of State. Is it really too much for these people to ask for somewhere affordable to live in the community where they work so hard and contribute to our society?

**Helen Hayes:** Does the hon. and learned Lady agree that the 11-month delay in the Government committing any funds to the replacement of flammable cladding has compounded and magnified the injustice of Grenfell Tower, leaving councils that already do not have enough money to deliver social housing scrabbling around to reprioritise urgent major works and unable to deliver the necessary changes?

**Joanna Cherry:** I agree wholeheartedly. This is a question of priorities and of where funds are committed. I understand that the council has huge reserves, so could it not dip into them to meet the requirements?

Even with a squeezed budget and without adequate powers to fully resist Tory austerity, the Scottish Government have managed to commit to an ambitious programme of home building, and I want to say a wee

bit about that to show what can be done even with that squeezed budget. In the last Parliament, over 33,000 new affordable homes were built in Scotland, including 6,000 council houses. In this Parliament, £3 billion has been invested by the Scottish Government to deliver at least 50,000 affordable homes—of which 35,000 will be available for social rent—security of tenure has been introduced in the private rented sector and, most importantly, we have abolished the right to buy.

I know the right to buy is a sacred totem for some Conservative Members, and I understand the desire many people have to buy and own their homes, but the reality is that selling all the social housing without replacing it will set up huge problems for the future, which is exactly what the Government have done.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Is it not time that we stopped using the words “affordable housing” when really we should be talking a lot more about social housing?

**Joanna Cherry:** We need have both affordable housing and social housing. The point is that not everyone can afford to buy their own home any longer, especially in this great city of London, where prices are out of the reach of most people, including most Members of Parliament. Building affordable homes and providing social housing has to rise to the top of the agenda in England. It has already done so in Scotland, and the record of the Scottish Government shows what can be done where there is a will to act. I urge the Government, as a result of this tragedy, to address the issue of social housing and to put it to the top of the agenda.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. Colleagues will realise that a large number of Members want to speak so, to start with, I will impose a four-minute time limit.

2.51 pm

**Paul Scully** (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to Mr Speaker for throwing open his apartment last week so that 100 MPs could meet Grenfell survivors and Grenfell families.

Monday’s debate on the public inquiry was humbling, and the response from the Grenfell United group was humbling, too. I met the group afterwards, and I met them on Parliament Square before the debate. They have carried out their campaign, liaison and dialogue with the Government and Members of Parliament with such dignity, dedication and resolve. It is important that we continue to make sure that people are at the centre of every decision we make.

When I read out the names of the 72 victims on Monday, the response from the Grenfell families was humbling. It took me a minute and a half to read out the names, but it was so significant for the families to know that their loved ones were named in the *Official Report*. That was very humbling for me. The small moves we can make do help.

Of course, there are much bigger moves that we have to make. There are people who are still concerned about their housing, and 14 households are likely still to be

without a permanent home beyond the anniversary of the fire, which is 14 households too many. This should have been done a long, long time ago. I know that this is not for want of effort or concern. This is an ever-complicated process, and it has been getting more and more complex as the number of households affected, beyond the ones that were lost, and the scale of the situation have become apparent.

I was in touch with the leader of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea ahead of Monday's debate, and I was updated on the reasons why those 14 households might remain without a permanent home beyond the anniversary. Those reasons include the levelling of floors; awaiting feedback from residents; internal fire-door work; finalising resident requirements, including flooring where freehold permission is required; the removal of old gas infrastructure within a particular property; and awaiting resident input on kitchen design. There are a number of different things, but we hope that they do not take too long.

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea bought 307 new homes, at a cost of £235 million, but Grenfell United residents are concerned that, in some cases, they are the wrong homes. There are people with mobility issues, and we have heard about the mental health issues. I have spoken to someone who had been living on an upper floor, above the fire, and their children clearly do not want to live on the first or second floor of a block of flats—they would like a ground-floor flat.

Going back to where I started, it is important that we make these residents the heart of our decisions and our process.

**Sir Oliver Heald** (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, I was also at the event in Speaker's House. The woman I spoke to was very realistic. The borough found a property for her, and works needed to be done, including works to make it fire compliant, which is what is taking the time. Does my hon. Friend agree that perhaps more effort needs to be put into getting the works done?

**Paul Scully:** My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely correct. We need to put every effort into getting these works done now. For every day that these people are in inappropriate temporary accommodation, their suffering is extended and prolonged.

**Karen Lee:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government need to do it and not just talk about it?

**Paul Scully:** I totally agree, and I was just about to come to that. I welcome the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to his place. The Government have been listening for so long and have been responding well—I know the Prime Minister is listening—and the Secretary of State, in his own redoubtable way, will add extra energy and bring a fresh pair of eyes. He is a man of action, and I suspect that it is because of his intervention that we now have two extra panel members on the public inquiry and that the Prime Minister has announced £400 million towards fire safety in other blocks. That is of particular interest to me because, ever since the fire, I have been liaising with people in my constituency, including residents of Chaucer House and Balaam House, to make sure they are in some way satisfied. It is not just people in north

Kensington but people across the country who are worried and concerned about the safety of the property they call home. The funding is very welcome news.

In terms of action, we have already talked about the Hackitt report, and the Royal Institute of British Architects has said that desktop studies should not have a place in fire safety and that non-combustible panels should not be used. We really do need to look at how much further we can go. Whatever Dame Judith says, can we go a little further so that we do not just talk about the fact that Grenfell should never happen again but that we make sure that it does not happen again?

2.57 pm

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): I will shortly be leaving to sit on a Committee, so I apologise that I might not be in the Chamber for the wind-ups.

Like others, I praise the dignity of the survivors and families of Grenfell on what might be our last opportunity to discuss Grenfell before the one-year anniversary. I praise the ongoing fight for justice. Civic society—not just in Kensington, but much more widely—has come together to support these families and raise money, with people helping each other. That includes the firefighters who risked their lives on the night of the fire and who, only a few weeks ago, ran the London marathon, some in full kit, to raise money for Grenfell.

It is worth acknowledging the fact that residents, many of whom were in tower blocks in Kensington, Westminster and Hammersmith, watched the tragedy unfold from their windows. They watched the horror and have, for the whole of the past year, looked out at an 18-storey tomb. What that does to people—some are worried about their own safety—is unimaginable. Much as the services, including mental health services, have tried to rise to the occasion, we know that those services have not been wholly adequate.

I have two quick points. The first, of course, is the issue of rehousing. At the meeting here in Parliament two days after the fire, I stressed the importance of getting people rehoused—and permanently rehoused—quickly. Many of those families had already been through the homelessness system and had been placed out of borough. They know what it is like to be in temporary accommodation, and they know what it is like to be insecure and to be moved around for years. No wonder they do not trust either the Government or the local authority to secure their housing.

Understandably, it will take time to place individual families, and their needs and circumstances have to be taken into account, but the wider picture, as has been mentioned, is the chronic shortage of social housing. Only today, the Chartered Institute of Housing reminded us that in 2016, out of 270,000 homes started across the whole country, just 5,000, or 2%, were social housing. There is a very long way to go.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady share my concern that the “Who owns England?” blog found, through a freedom of information request, that nearly 2,000 properties were lying empty in Kensington and Chelsea, and that some of those had been empty for between 11 and 15 years, with many owned by offshore trusts? Obviously some of that was taken into consideration during the passage of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill.

**Ms Buck:** I am grateful for that intervention, and I believe my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) will refer to that issue.

I have a particular question I want to put to the Minister. I am concerned about the fact that even after the fire, housing associations in inner London, including in Westminster, and on the border, including in Hammersmith, were selling vacant properties on the open market, including family-sized properties. I am not saying that those properties would have been suitable for Grenfell families, as they may not have been, but they would have relieved the general pressure on housing and homelessness in inner London, and perhaps created other opportunities. I am also aware that, even as we speak, Kensington and Chelsea Council is considering planning permission for developments in the borough where there is a net loss of social housing. Again, those social housing places may not have been appropriate for Grenfell survivors, but they would have reduced the pressure. The Minister needs to stop this and deal with it.

I, like others, welcome the slightly overdue but genuinely welcome investment in fire safety and the removal of the cladding. I would like to know from the Minister whether this will be retrospective. The six 20-storey towers of the Warwick and Brindley Estates have had their cladding removed, at considerable expense, and we would like to know whether we will be able to draw upon that money.

Finally, on the issue of the Hackitt review, there are concerns about desktop studies and the ability to use combustible materials. We will see tomorrow, as there will be a statement, whether the review confirms some of our concerns. I am clear that it does not look as though the Hackitt review or the Government fully understand the nature of mixed tenure in some of our blocks. We know there are issues to address on social housing and on leaseholders, which I am sure others will address, but many social housing blocks contain leasehold properties, and the fact that we cannot access them or ensure that they are available for fire safety works, including the retrofitting of sprinklers, is a real worry. It does not look as though the Hackitt review has fully taken that on board and it needs to do so.

The Grenfell tragedy must never be repeated, and neither must the disastrous aftermath of that tragedy, which let people down so badly. Some progress has been made, particularly with this announcement of additional money, but at the moment neither the issue of housing nor the issue of fire safety have been fully dealt with, even a full year after that appalling tragedy.

3.2 pm

**Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this debate on the Grenfell Tower tragedy as we head towards the first anniversary of this most horrific fire, which took so many lives and caused enormous suffering and devastation. We are all keen to ensure that such an event is never repeated.

I am very aware that this Government have given the survivors of Grenfell and relatives of the deceased enormous support, through both resources and financial assistance. Like many, I am grateful for the priority that the Government have given to the survivors and also to the circumstances of the fire, in order to ensure that such a disaster is never allowed to happen again in this

country. Since entering the House, I have been fortunate enough to have served as a vice-chair of the all-party group on fire safety rescue, under the distinguished chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), and I am pleased that so many members of that group from both sides of the House are in the Chamber today. As one would expect, much of our time over the past 11 months has been taken up with the aftermath of the Grenfell fire tragedy. I am very grateful to our secretariat, Mr Ronnie King, the former chief fire officer for Mid and West Wales fire service, whose experience has guided us fully through many hours of evidence and witness participation, which has given us a valuable insight into this terrible disaster.

Many points have been highlighted to our group, and they have raised many matters that we expect to be examined in and covered by the public inquiry into this fire headed by Sir Martin Moore-Bick. Like many Members, I am grateful to the Prime Minister for adding two additional members to the panel ahead of phase 2 of the inquiry, thereby bringing an additional breadth of skills and diversity of expertise. That was requested by the campaigning groups, and the members of those groups will now have additional confidence in the inquiry itself.

The all-party group was grateful to Dame Judith Hackitt for attending one of our sessions. She gave a comprehensive insight into the structure and remit of her independent review of building regulations and fire safety. Dame Judith's interim report pointed out six broad areas for improvement, which have been heavily highlighted and will be taken on board by the Minister for Housing and the Secretary of State. I am pleased that the Government have committed to implementing all the recommendations which fall directly to the Government to deliver. Like the whole House, I look forward to Dame Judith's full report, which is being published tomorrow.

I have already said that the Government have made support available for survivors, families of the bereaved and members of the surrounding community, but—there is a “but”—it still appears that some of those in need are unaware of all the support that is available. Perhaps the Minister would like to update the House on all actions that his Department is taking to ensure that those in need are aware of the help available to them. I believe that the same can be said for those in need of mental health support—this is, of course, Mental Health Awareness Week. I know that the support is available, but clearly not all survivors or bereaved families know that, or will even admit that help is needed and accept that help after such a traumatic event. I look forward to the Minister's summing up and to the many other contributions that will be made by colleagues on both sides of the House.

3.6 pm

**Emma Dent Coad** (Kensington) (Lab): I will leave the discussion of cladding and the Hackitt report to others, and I will instead focus on the dire state of rehousing our Grenfell-affected households—it is shameful. Let me remind the House that I am talking about my community: some of my friends, some who passed away, and some who lost close family. As it is Mental Health Awareness Week, let me announce that I have also had my Time to Talk counselling treatment. It does

not make you better, it does not make the anger go away and it does not make the sadness go away. Perhaps you cope with it better, but it does not actually heal.

Ministers have said over and over again in this House that those responsible will be held to account, but the failing council responsible for the deaths of 72 cherished individuals—the failing council under police investigation for alleged corporate manslaughter—is still in charge of rehousing. The taskforce report of December last year demanded culture change at the council. Some of the faces have changed, but the culture of disrespect towards social tenants, and the shambolic organisation behind it, with which I have daily contact, remains in place. My office is now dealing with about 100 Grenfell-affected households, comprising nearly 250 people. More are coming every week, as months go by, and they are still in emergency accommodation. The Grenfell-related housing statistics we have heard weekly from the council and successive Ministers are not the whole story. There is a lack of candour about those statistics. To put it politely, the figures have been spun. In November, there were not 210 Grenfell-related households needing rehousing. I had a full tally from the housing department at the time and there were 376 such households, because this includes the Walkways—homes to which people are afraid to return or cannot abide to return. The number of children who needed rehousing at that time was 323, of whom more than 200 were in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, which is an infringement of their human rights. I have asked the council four times to update these figures and it will not do so—what on earth is it hiding?

The numbers have been spun because of the division between those from the tower and Grenfell Walk, and those living in the Walkways, many of whom are reliving the horror every day as they look through their windows. Some have returned, but many cannot. Keeping children in a bed and breakfast for more than six weeks is illegal, and there is good reason for that. We saw on ITV recently a mother whose four-year-old was regressing and talking like a baby, and struggling at nursery. I know of many schoolchildren who are unable to keep up with their studies, falling into depression at a young age and wanting to take their own lives, and of students who have dropped out of further education because they simply cannot cope, while their parents are barely hanging on. Meanwhile, we are subjected to a barrage of platitudes and spin from Ministers—and, indeed, the council—who have it in their power to take control of this pitiful and shameful situation, but refuse, crying crocodile tears and commending people's dignity while reproaching the council for its failure.

Let me paint a picture of the chaos which the Government are allowing to prevail. First, why were so many households with disabled people living in a tower block? Some had lived there for many years, but some were moved there. There was a policy of moving households with disabled people into the lower floors of the block—we have seen a letter confirming this—and that needs to change.

**Fiona Onasanya** (Peterborough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way during such a passionate, moving and correct speech. Does she agree that those people have generally been failed by the Government?

**Emma Dent Coad:** I absolutely concur; they have been failed.

Secondly, the more pernicious sections of the media have berated families for not accepting so-called interim housing, implying that they love living in the luxury of hotels. I have visited those hotels. A Premier Inn is not a luxury. Some have called it a prison. Many have refused the so-called interim housing because they know what it means. A “temporary” placement that I know of lasted 13 years.

As for offers of permanent accommodation, the problems are manifold. Some are heartbreaking. One family was offered a flat in the so-called luxury of Kensington Row, but could not accept it because they needed adaptations to live independently. That work cannot be done for two years because the block is still under guarantee. The proposed solution was to offer home care. A family who were able to live independently were told to accept care from strangers, and another were offered accommodation in an older building needing adaptations.

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the situation she describes is intolerable and must be changed?

**Emma Dent Coad:** Yes. I thank my hon. Friend.

The council has refused to pay for those adaptations because the property is owned by a housing association, and the family are so desperate to move that they have offered to fund the adaptations themselves from their compensation payment. Worst of all to date is a self-sufficient family, whom I know very well, who care for their older disabled family member and are proud to do so, but whose housing needs cannot be met. The council suggested they put that older family member in a care home so that they could be rehoused separately.

The pledges, commitments and guarantees of the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State or this week's Housing Minister are not rehousing people. We ask the Government once again to send in commissioners to take control of this shameful process. If the Government continue to sit on their hands while tutting their disapproval, they should think about this: some Grenfell-affected people may not make it.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. I understand that there have been interventions, but because of that, after the next speaker, I will have to reduce the time limit to three minutes. Even then, it might not be possible to get everybody in.

3.12 pm

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): Last July, following the general election, we gathered in the House to debate the inquiry into Grenfell. Many of us also attended the gathering in Speaker's House, and I will never forget the conversation I had with someone who had lost two relatives in the fire. They described how they had spoken to their relatives on a mobile phone, instructing them to go down to the ground floor, and then had a different conversation when their relatives went to the top of the building and lost their lives. I do not know how those people are coping with the trauma they have suffered.

I join others in saying that the disaster should never have happened and that it has brought great shame on our nation. My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon

[*Sir David Amess*]

and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) is the vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for fire safety and rescue, which I chair. It has existed for 18 years, and we have been served by two wonderful secretaries, Douglas Smith and now Ronnie King. We have 29 active members and we have given countless recommendations to all sorts of people about what should have happened.

I gently say to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that I do not want to hear anyone in the House say that there are lessons to be learned. There is no point in saying that unless we take action. The lesson to be learned is that when good advice is given, it should be taken.

The all-party group wrote to the previous Secretary of State, now the Home Secretary, with several recommendations, which the Opposition spokesman mentioned. They include the mandatory implementation of automatic fire sprinklers; the retrofitting of sprinklers—it is crazy that we build new buildings but it is not mandatory to have sprinklers in them; the introduction of a legally binding requirement for the use of non-combustible materials; the full publication of all information used to secure approval of building materials; the introduction of a legally binding requirement for new builds to have multiple escape routes; the introduction of regulatory provisions for the better assignment of responsibility; accountability at key points in the build chain, through to building handover; the creation of a national fire safety agency as a non-departmental public body answering to the Home Secretary; and the necessary revision of the statutory building regulations and approved documents to achieve those goals.

I fully accept that the Government have already acted on several points, and I look forward to Dame Judith Hackitt's report tomorrow. However, our regulations and enforcement mechanisms are unchanged from those that failed to stop Grenfell. I regret that I did not shout louder as the chairman of the all-party. There is blame—I understand that.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Earlier, the hon. Gentleman said that we always say that we will learn lessons, but we never actually implement them. That is a valid point.

**Sir David Amess:** I agree. It is no comfort to the traumatised victims when we engage in all this. Action is needed. I therefore hope that tomorrow, when we have the report and the statement, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his team of Ministers will not just say that there are lessons to be learned, but will take action and accept recommendations, not least those of our all-party group.

3.17 pm

**Mr Steve Reed** (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): Just a year ago, following the tragic and horrific fire at Grenfell, the Prime Minister promised to “do whatever it takes to keep people safe”.

Nearly a year later, every piece of failed safety regulation and every piece of flawed guidance that was in place before Grenfell is still there. That is not acceptable.

Although it is welcome that the Government have belatedly found the funding to help with the remedial works on social housing blocks, they have offered precious

little to people living in privately owned blocks. I want to focus on the plight of leaseholders, who feel that the Government have abandoned them and hung them out to dry.

Let us consider briefly why this cladding is on buildings in the first place. Following the deadly Lakanal House fire in 2009, when six lives were lost, an inquest was held. It reported to the Government in 2013. The coroner told the Government that the fire safety regulations were confusing, not fit for purpose and needed to be revised, but the Government did nothing. The same ACM cladding with a polyethylene core continued to be put up on residential buildings. It was put on Grenfell in 2016, and Grenfell went up in flames 2017 with such lethal and tragic consequences.

If the Government had acted on the coroner's advice after Lakanal, people would never have died in Grenfell Tower. The cladding is on buildings because the Government did nothing to correct the flawed regulations when they were told they were a problem. The moral duty to act was on the Government, but instead of accepting that, the previous Secretary of State made an art form of palming off the blame on anybody else. In this Chamber, he said that it was the responsibility of developers, freeholders, managing agents and insurers, even though there is no proven legal obligation on any of those people to pay for the removal of cladding. The two first-tier housing tribunals found leaseholders responsible for the costs. However, the previous Secretary of State said that he wanted no costs to be passed on to leaseholders, yet he took no action to ensure that. Leaseholders have been left living in unsaleable homes, fearful for their safety, and in fear of unaffordable debt that is often more than they earn in a year.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Constituents in Bromley and Chislehurst have exactly the same problem. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as was mentioned earlier in the debate, the difficulty is that there is no mechanism for enforcing a moral duty and no means whereby leaseholders can get recompense? Should the Government consider some emergency funding comparable with the help that is being given to those in publicly owned blocks?

**Mr Reed:** The hon. Gentleman makes the legal point much more eloquently than I could. I hope that the Secretary of State will listen to that.

Here is a proposal for what the Government might do. First, they should fund the removal and replacement of flammable cladding on all residential blocks on which it is found, whether in the private or public sector. We simply cannot leave leaseholders living in limbo, their lives on hold for years while these issues are dragged through the courts at a snail's pace. If it turns out that developers, freeholders or whoever are legally liable, the Government can then claim the money back. My guess is that it will turn out that the Government are liable for failing to correct guidance and regulations that they knew were flawed for years before this happened.

The Government's first priority must be the protection of human life. We cannot allow any more Grenfells. It is not acceptable just to leave this cladding on buildings in which people are living. This dangerous cladding must be taken down, wherever it is found. No more delays, no more Grenfells; let us get this cladding taken down.

3.21 pm

**Kwasi Kwarteng** (Spelthorne) (Con): I spoke about Grenfell Tower in the Westminster Hall debate on Monday, and wish to reiterate some of the remarks I made then.

This is a very important issue for Government Members. For too long, we have hidden behind technocratic debates and technocratic assertions of how much money we have spent or whether the sprinklers were in the right place. I think too few Members on the Government Benches understand the emotional charge of the debate about Grenfell. It was an appalling tragedy. It has been described, quite rightly, as a national scandal.

I know the area reasonably well: my mother had two cousins who lived in Trellick Tower when it was social housing, so I spent time there and know the area. One of the problems is that in the '80s the people who lived in the tower—people who lived in social housing—felt far more like members of the community than perhaps is the case now. Today, the suspicion is that as the royal borough has got wealthier and wealthier, the political class—the people running the borough—have forgotten some of the less-advantaged members of their community. It has become very much a place of bankers, millionaires and hedge fund owners, and I have heard that the people who lived in Grenfell Tower had felt more and more isolated over the past 20 or 30 years.

For people on this side of the House—for Conservatives—this is a very big problem. Members on these Benches do not often like to talk about inequality, but in this instance there was an issue of a polarised society between the haves and the have-nots. The suspicion has always been that the borough and the political forces that shape people's lives have been less and less involved in and interested in the lives of more vulnerable people, poorer people and immigrants.

That is a huge challenge for my right hon. Friend who has just entered his post as Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. His tenure will very much be judged by his response to this appalling tragedy. As other Members have said, we can debate this endlessly—we can use warm words and exchange speeches—but I suggest to my right hon. Friend that he should have an action plan and a list of tangible things that he wants to achieve that can actually benefit people on the ground. There is no end of words and speeches but, as people have said, we need action. Frankly, the Government and the Conservative party, which was in charge nationally and locally, will very much be judged on the outcome. This is something from which we should not be allowed to walk away.

**Karen Lee:** It is about not just action, but timely action. The Prime Minister has made an announcement on the removal of the cladding, but yet again there is no timescale.

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** I fully endorse what has been said about that. One of the difficulties and sadnesses of this whole process has been that although the Government have given with one hand, what they have granted has been perceived as having been given slowly, grudgingly and reluctantly. A situation like this is all about hearts and minds. As a Government and a party, we have to bend over backwards to ensure that people have trust in or a modicum of respect for the process. If there is any hint or suspicion that people do not care, or if people

feel that they have to jump over a series of administrative hurdles, we will lose a huge amount of good will from the people who matter the most in this tragedy: the victims and their families.

3.24 pm

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate, but it is nothing short of outrageous and frankly shameful that we are debating this motion today, because the rehousing of all the survivors from the Grenfell Tower should have been done as a matter of course and should be complete by now.

A great tragedy and injustice of the Grenfell fire is that it was so easily avoidable. As we all know, the residents had repeatedly raised their concerns and asked for maintenance work to be carried out, and they had spoken of their fear that they would not be listened to until disaster struck. The warnings were not listened to, and the horror that befell the residents of Grenfell Tower was the consequence. This disaster should have marked a decisive moment in British politics. It should have shocked the Government into acknowledging the injustices and their neglect of working-class people, including people of colour and migrants.

It is hard to conclude that the Government have acknowledged that injustice. Eleven months on, two thirds of survivors are still stuck in budget hotels or temporary accommodation. Eleven months on, only seven of the 311 tower blocks with dangerous cladding have had it replaced, with residents in blocks such as Castlemaine Tower in my constituency still going to bed each night knowing that their block is not safe. Eleven months on, the Government still do not know how many tower blocks are unsafe, with some councils, such as Wandsworth, not even releasing the information. That is 11 months during which the survivors of the disaster have not been able to begin to rebuild their lives, and 11 months of residents in tower blocks living in fear.

The Government promised that they would take action. Immediately after the fire, the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), said that he would support Kensington and Chelsea Council in rehousing all survivors within a year. I think we can all fairly conclude that Kensington and Chelsea Council has failed the people of Grenfell. The Government must not allow a year to pass without all survivors being adequately rehoused, and they must not allow a year to pass without taking comprehensive action to fix our broken system of building controls and checks.

When the Minister responds to the debate, will he promise that all survivors will be permanently housed in good social housing before the anniversary of the fire? Will he pledge to undertake a comprehensive reform of fire safety checks and controls, including ending the use of desktop studies and not allowing combustible cladding and insulation to be used on high-rise tower blocks? We need a Government committed to doing justice for those affected. The best that we can now hope for is that the Government will not let a year pass.

3.27 pm

**Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): As I said earlier this week, on Monday, Grenfell Tower was quite simply an horrific tragedy that will doubtless have a profound

[Giles Watling]

effect on us all for the rest of our lives. It is therefore right that we work together to ensure that such a tragedy never happens again.

As of 12 April 2018, 304 buildings across the country have been identified as being clad in potentially dangerous material. These are a mixture of public and private social housing, public sector buildings, and private sector residential buildings. The scale of this problem shows that there remains a real danger of this happening again—more so because the remedial work has been far too slow. In some cases, the pace has necessitated the employment of fire watch officers.

Currently, of the 158 buildings with cladding in the social sector, remediation work has begun on 104—that is 66%—and has only been completed on seven of them. That is not good enough. I know that Ministers are fully supporting local authorities in their remedial cladding work, including where they need financial flexibility and support. I am pleased to say that no local authority seeking financial flexibility for remedial cladding has had their request denied. I understand that funding for this work is being provided directly from central Government. These delays have been caused by the necessary engagement with construction services to ensure that renovations are carried out correctly, accurately and in a way that can reassure tenants and the wider public. Tenants need to know that they are living in a space that is safe; they need to be able to sleep peacefully at night, without care.

Although I recognise that the pace of change has been slow, the Government have been moving forward at a pace commensurate with safety and security, which is vital. I say that as someone who is disappointed with the pace of change here, but also as someone who believes that we should work together to address these issues, rather than use these delays as a justification to rush our response to this dreadful tragedy. This is a truly complex situation and we must come together and take time to deal with this issue properly. We must also recognise the progress that has been made so far. Ministers have made progress with the reform of the building regulations—another area covered by the motion today. We all know that there will be an independent review regarding building regulations and fire safety led by Dame Judith Hackitt. An interim report published in December pointed out six broad areas for improvement, and the Government have committed to implementing those improvements.

In conclusion, we must see that survivors are permanently rehoused. We must see a reform of the current building regulations. That might take time but we must see that the job is properly done.

3.30 pm

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The east end of Edinburgh is a very long way away from North Kensington, but in this debate today I want to place on record, on behalf of the people whom I represent, our solidarity with the victims of Grenfell and our support for their campaign to get the answers as to why this happened to them. I say that not just because we are motivated by a sense of outrage that this could happen, or a sense of empathy for the victims, but because we have a direct material interest in making sure that this

never happens again. That is why this inquiry is not just a matter for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, nor indeed for London or for England, but a matter of concern for the entire United Kingdom.

I want to see the fullest possible inquiry, and I want to see an inquiry that is not scared to investigate—without fear or favour—and to take on some of the vested powerful interests that are no doubt at play in this debate. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has decided that she will appoint independent advisers to assist the chair, but, like others, I am somewhat bemused that it has taken so many months of campaigning, 150,000 people to sign a petition, and a parliamentary debate for this most reasonable of requests to be met. I hope that that does not give us an indication of how the Government will deal with the inquiry as it goes forward. We need more Government intervention and we need it to be swifter and to have greater force.

I know that the Minister's hands were not on this decision or on the delay in appointing these people, but what is vital now is that these independent advisers have the confidence of the people who were most affected by this disaster. Therefore, I would like to secure a commitment from him that there will be consultation with the victims of Grenfell in determining who should take up the position of these advisers.

On the point about rehousing, it beggars belief that people are still living in hotels and temporary accommodation almost a year after the disaster. Frankly, it undermines all the declarations of commitment and concern that have come from the Government. The Government must intervene. I want to hear from the Minister that he will set a deadline by which Kensington and Chelsea Council have to provide a report on the rehousing of every person affected. If that deadline is not met, the Government should take the council into special measures and make this a national responsibility. Unless that happens, there is no guarantee that this will not drag on and on. The matter is of course compounded by historical context. I agree with the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) when he remarks that it is clear that public administration in this area has been conducted for too long on behalf of the well-off and the content, and it has ignored people at the other end of the scale. That must change and it must change quickly.

3.33 pm

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): This was an appalling tragedy. I understand the situation as a London MP, but it has had consequences across the country. It concerns me as a former fire services Minister and as a former Minister dealing with planning matters in the Department for Communities and Local Government. I know that the Secretary of State wants to get this right; he starts with great good will. The best thing we can do is to ensure not only that the causes are discovered, but that the lessons are learned. I will not touch on building regulation issues today—I will perhaps save that for tomorrow—but I do want to hark back to my intervention on the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed).

I am pleased that the Government have made increased public funding available to ensure that cladding on council-owned or housing association tower blocks is replaced and rectified. That is the right thing to do.

The Secretary of State's predecessor said that the owners of private blocks should ensure that the costs did not fall upon the leaseholders. Morally that is right, but there is no legal mechanism for enforcing that.

The Northpoint building in my constituency was converted from offices to flats in 1999 by Alfred McAlpine, and the flats are on long leases. The building was certified as compliant in 1999. It was then checked in 2009 after the Lakanal House fire, and was held to be compliant. A subsequent check after the Grenfell Tower fire led to it being classified as category 3, which is the worst level of combustibility.

There is no suggestion of any negligence on the part of the contractors or those who carried out the previous investigations—certainly nothing that will found any cause of action on behalf of the leaseholders. There is nothing in the lease to suggest that any breach of duty by the managing agents, the freeholders or anyone else involved in that building would remove liability from the leaseholders. The findings in recent litigation in the upper tribunals have, in fact, gone against leaseholders and in favour of freeholders. Freeholders are often commercial companies that have a fiduciary duty to their shareholders. I am afraid that moral obligations are not going to be enough.

In this case, Alfred McAlpine, through a series of mergers and takeovers, ended up as part of the Carillion Group, which is now in liquidation. The prospect of there being any redress for the leaseholders of the Northpoint building, even if there were a legal mechanism, is non-existent. The Minister should therefore look into some kind of emergency mechanism; we are not talking about large sums of money in the overall scheme of things.

**Giles Watling:** Is my hon. Friend suggesting that we need a change of law for such cases?

**Robert Neill:** Well, that may be something to look at for the future, but it cannot be done retrospectively and it would not help the position of current leaseholders. We need something that assists them.

It may be that something can be recovered at some point if people are found to be at fault, but we need a bridging arrangement to enable leaseholders to carry out remedial works. They often have very little equity because the flats are virtually unsaleable, and they are either first-time buyers or downsizers so are financially pressed at the best of times. I suggest that some bridging arrangement to help them through that period would be a practical means of ensuring that the Government meet that moral duty, which there is currently neither a legal nor a practical means of achieving. Such an arrangement would give a greater degree of parity between those in the private sector and the Government's welcome approach to those in the public sector.

3.37 pm

**Mr David Lammy** (Tottenham) (Lab): I am very grateful to have a few minutes to speak in this debate, and because it is only a few minutes I want to focus on Khadija Saye, who died on the 20th floor. My interest in this is not wholly impartial, because Khadija worked for my wife as an intern. She was a beautiful 24-year-old woman with her life before her. She was really going to emerge as a fantastic artist and had already done some formidable work that was on show at the Venice Biennale.

Even though Khadija lived on the 20th floor, she died on the ninth floor of Grenfell Tower. I think that her mother was found further up, on the 16th or 17th floor. Khadija died, frankly, because the state failed her. The state told her to stay put and she stayed put. When she did leave, even though obviously she got spilt up from her mother, she did not quite make it out. Had she set about leaving earlier, she would probably be with us today. It is that business of state failure that I ask the new Secretary of State to reflect on.

When we have a Prime Minister who says that people will be housed within three weeks, that compounds state failure. When we have a community that ask for representation on an inquiry that speaks to them and their experience, and it takes so long to get that, that is state failure. When there are other people living in social housing and big tower housing blocks fully aware that the vast majority of Members of Parliament have not experienced living in a tower block, have not experienced social housing, and do not have families who have experienced it, and it takes this long to get a commitment to help fund the replacement cladding, that is also state failure.

I implore the Secretary of State to reflect hard on what "social" means. In the economy around us, "social" clearly has to mean something. That is why there is now so much emphasis on social housing and not just affordable housing. Affordable housing has come to mean something that might speak to a political class because they find it affordable—just—but certainly does not speak to many ordinary people. Let us put back in the "social" if we are to rebuild trust and make a commitment to Khadija and her mother Mary who died, and all those others who lost their lives, but also to the people who witnessed this most awful atrocity.

3.40 pm

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), who captures the tragedy so effectively in his words.

So much of what I would have said has already been said incredibly effectively by colleagues across the House that I would just like to reflect for a moment on one particular issue—the purpose of the cladding and why it was there in the first place. It is actually there to improve the standard of living of residents in these blocks by ensuring that they have better insulation and therefore their flats—their homes—are more comfortable and warmer places for them to live. I would like the Minister to reflect on the standard of living of these residents. Whatever comes later, we must offer people safety and reassurance, but also the right standard of living.

3.41 pm

**Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for this brief opportunity to speak. It is a pleasure to follow the—very brief—hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), who does the House a great service in giving us extra seconds. I welcome the Secretary of State to his new position. Much is expected of him and his ministerial team. He has a huge challenge in this area.

The key conclusion already drawn about the Grenfell fire is that it should never have happened. The various inquiries—the inquest, the police's criminal investigation,

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

the Dame Judith Hackitt review and the public inquiry—should give us confidence that there will be conclusions to reassure all of us. However, in an age of such scepticism and cynicism, it is easy for society to be worried about the outcomes. The first element expected to report is the review led by Dame Judith Hackitt. The police and public inquiries will naturally be expected to be more fundamental in their conclusions. Clearly, the public inquiry will be the chance to examine, minute by minute, what happened leading up to the fire, the development of the fire and the conclusions.

Dame Judith's conclusions might not be so explicit, but much is expected, especially with regard to the review of the fire guidance included in Approved Document B, which guides the building regulations. The Government have been expected to review Approved Document B and have been promising to do so since 2011. Other matters such as sprinklers and desktop studies ought to be included in her review's recommendations, as well as the ban on combustible materials as part of the external envelope of buildings, already mentioned by a number of colleagues. Another positive recommendation ought to be to relocate fire safety enforcement from the Home Office to sit alongside building and housing regulations in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. There is logic to that suggestion.

Can the Secretary of State assure us that he and his team will see Dame Judith's report tomorrow not as a conclusion—especially if it falls short on a number of the explicit recommendations expected by the all-party parliamentary group on fire safety rescue and others—but just as a starting point?

Finally, the PM's announcement of more money for social landlords for removal, replacement and remedial work is very welcome. We need the same fund to be available to leaseholders.

3.43 pm

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): There are so many questions that have either not been answered or inadequately answered in the past year that all I can do is go over some of them very briefly and hope that the new Secretary of State will take some heed.

First, with regard to the seat of the fire, yesterday saw the publication of the results of the inquiry by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy into the type of fridge freezer that we have known, almost since the date of the fire, was the cause. All it says is that there was a low risk from these types of fridges continuing to be used. There is no indication of what the fault was, whether it was a manufacturing fault, or how the fire actually started. We now know, as Which? has told me during the debate, that it was a plastic-backed fridge. We know that plastic-backed fridges cause fire to spread incredibly quickly compared with metal-backed fridges, and there is a big campaign now to stop that type of fridge being sold. That needs to be looked at.

Of course we need to look at the issue of fire spread, and not just cladding or what should have retarded the spread of fire but what may have accelerated it. We need to look at things such as sprinklers, the means of escape and, as has just been mentioned, the advice given to residents in this situation. What we need is prescription. That is the message coming from RIBA, the Local

Government Association, the National Housing Federation and Shelter, which I met this morning. We need architects, designers and builders to be told how buildings should be built to make them safe—for example, only using non-combustible materials or having more than one means of escape.

I understand that we will return to this tomorrow morning, but all the indications are that Dame Judith Hackitt's review will not go down that route. Instead, it will go on about safe systems and systematic answers. With respect, that is not sufficient. I want my constituents, as I am sure every other Member here does, to feel safe and know that they are in safe buildings that will not catch fire and that, if the buildings do catch fire, that fire will be easily retarded.

The other main issue, as Members have said, is housing. It is about not just the rehousing of the people from in and around Grenfell, but the replacement—probably not on the Grenfell site—of the social housing that was lost. It is about the wider lessons to learn.

I am glad that there will be a Green Paper on social housing, but I say gently to the Secretary of State that there will have to be a sea change in the way the Conservative party has dealt with social housing over the past 10 to 20 years if it is to really make a difference to the security, safety and decency of social homes. I hope that he will be committed to that. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), I have seen examples of the disposal of good-quality homes, the failure to replace them and the insecure conditions in which people have been made to live. Grenfell has shown that that is the problem, but it is a problem that goes much wider than Grenfell and is one we need to address.

3.46 pm

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): I want to briefly add to the comments that I made in the Westminster Hall debate on this subject on Monday. I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for opening that debate.

I want to say two things. First, I ask all Members of the House not to say about Grenfell that this should never happen again. I was the local councillor for Lakanal House when it went up in flames in 2009, and I have to tell everyone that it is too late; it has already happened again. Grenfell is this disaster happening again. We all need to consider the reasons why we failed to learn those lessons. It is very important that we stop thinking about the fact that we ought to prevent future disasters when we are already staring in the face the repetition of a disaster. In addition, the secondary tragedy of the Government's failure to respond to disaster, as happened after the Hillsborough disaster in 1989, looks set to happen again. The lack of faith that people felt in institutions of the state at that time is, I feel, on the horizon now.

My second point is that Ministers, especially the Secretary of State, should not think there is nothing they can do about that lack of faith. They should not think that people will necessarily lose faith in the Government and what they do because of this disaster. There are things that they can do about it, such as implementing the charter that Bishop James Jones called for in his report on the experience of the Hillsborough families. We know that the Bellwin scheme and all the

things we have in place at the moment are way out of date. I know that from the New Ferry explosion in my constituency. We should learn the lessons of Tessa Jowell's life in responding to disaster and implement James Jones's charter. In addition to the other measures that we need, the Government should bring forward the public advocate mentioned in the Queen's Speech. That way, as the Minister said, people will have a legacy.

3.49 pm

**Fiona Onasanya** (Peterborough) (Lab): Each of these deaths was completely avoidable, as concerns about the safety of the building were repeatedly ignored. The people who have died were failed. The survivors of the tragedy at Grenfell were failed. They were failed by their local council, and they have been failed by central Government since the fire. They were failed before, during and after this whole avoidable tragedy.

Those affected by this tragedy deserve justice, and those responsible for the refurbishments and the failure to ensure the safety of residents with the appropriate fire safety measures should be held to account and face criminal proceedings. Having spoken to survivors of this tragedy, I know there is distrust in this Government's ability to review properly what happened in the build-up to the fire and during the aftermath. In fact, one of them told me that they had "lost hope for the future".

It has taken the Prime Minister 11 months finally to hear the voices of campaigners, such as those at Grenfell United, and to appoint an independent and experienced panel for the public inquiry. Understandably, many people are asking why this important appointment has taken this long to agree. There is genuine concern that the fight for truth about Grenfell could last decades, much like the grave injustices of Hillsborough and the murder of Stephen Lawrence. But through the hard work of the survivors at Grenfell United, there is hope that by implementing the recommendations of the inquiry for survivors, bereaved families and thousands living in tower blocks up and down the country, a catastrophic tragedy like Grenfell Tower fire, which should never have happened in the first place, will never happen again.

3.50 pm

**Karen Lee** (Lincoln) (Lab): I want to commend the Fire Brigades Union for its work on the night of the fire and for its support for the bereaved and the survivors since then. I will depart from my script to say that, about a week after the fire, I visited the site, and I popped into the Latymer Christian centre next door. To say that the grief and pain was raw is just an understatement. I ended up in tears; seriously, I did.

For me, this debate is about two things. First, there is the failure permanently to rehouse the people who still need rehousing. Let us have a timeline—a clear timeline—for that. Secondly, there is the failure to say when that cladding is coming off. Let us have a date for that—a timeline again—because the people of Grenfell deserve better. This Chamber needs to hear those dates.

3.51 pm

**Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): I am sorry that our debate has been cut short by the statement earlier, so Members did not get to speak for the length of time they wanted and our response has to be so short.

A little under a year ago, when we met in this place after the worst fire for over a century, Mr Speaker said:

"There will be no more tragic matter treated of in this House in this Parliament than that which is before us now".—[*Official Report*, 26 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 352.]

Time does not diminish the tragedy for those who lost their loved ones, but the time that has passed should have helped us to do right by those people and to do more to ensure that this does not happen again. As so many powerful and reflective contributions today and in Westminster Hall earlier this week have told us, the Government's response on every point and at every turn has not been what it should it have been. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) so powerfully said, this has been "state failure". The Secretary of State spoke with compassion in his wide-ranging speech and struck a different tone by accepting his Government's failings, but he did not give us the commitments and answers that we and many watching this debate wanted to hear.

Eleven months ago, the Government promised that all survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire would be permanently rehoused within one year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) said, two thirds of survivors are still in hotels or temporary housing. We heard so powerfully from my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) about the impact of that on the children who are falling into depression and dropping out of education. When will everyone be rehoused? As my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said, when will the Government look at the wider problems of the under-supply of social and affordable housing? The Secretary of State said that he wanted to speed up this process. When he has finished looking at that, will he come back to the House and tell us what is to be done?

Eleven months ago, the Government promised that all tower blocks with dangerous cladding would be made safe. As the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) said, over 300 buildings so far have been identified as unsafe, but only seven of them have had their cladding removed. The Government have today announced £400 million to fully fund the removal and replacement of dangerous cladding, which is welcome but obviously questions remain. What is the £400 million based on? Where is that money coming from? Is something else to be cut? Will this pay for all 158 social housing blocks to have their cladding removed? What is the Minister's definition of dangerous cladding? What about the private blocks? As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) said, there is a complete lack of clarity about who is responsible for removing cladding in private blocks. Are the Government accepting, given the announcement today of that £400 million, that there are significant deficiencies in building regulations that need to be looked at?

Eleven months ago, the Government promised there would be significant reform of the current system of building regulations. It has been widely reported that the Hackitt review will not recommend bans on combustible material on tower blocks and nor will it abolish desktop studies. On the Labour Benches, and I think on all sides of the House, we pray that that is not true. If it is true, we pray that the Government go further than Hackitt and that that is the start and not the end of the process. I think there is unprecedented support across this Chamber

[Sarah Jones]

for a ban on combustible cladding, a ban on desktop studies and a publicly accountable system of building control.

To use the lives of those who died as a vehicle for point-scoring would make us all monsters, but not to call out and hold to account the Government's failure to act—to act well, to act quickly, to act now—would make us worthless to those survivors who need us now. I therefore say to the Government that it is not too late to put this right. As the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) says, there is no point in saying there are lessons to be learned unless we take action.

3.56 pm

**The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab):** I welcome the powerful and poignant contributions to the debate from all sides, in particular the very moving personal speech by right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy).

May I pay tribute to the bereaved and the survivors who continue to suffer the anguish of having lost so many loved ones, who continue to suffer personally in countless scarcely imaginable ways and yet who, through their tenacity and determination, can only inspire every one of us in this House? As sobering as it has been over the past four months to hear at first-hand the piercing pain of this precious community, it has also been an honour to get to know the Grenfell United community, the survivors and bereaved, and a privilege to try to serve them in a ministerial capacity. If I could sum up the task at hand, it is to support the survivors and bereaved to move into new homes, but also, more broadly, to help them to move on with their lives in as positive a way as possible after such a harrowing ordeal.

The Government are committed to ensuring that all former residents are supported into permanent new homes as swiftly as possible and we continue to work hard with the council to achieve that. Of the 210 households from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk, there are now 201 who have either moved or accepted temporary or permanent accommodation. Two thirds of them have moved out of emergency accommodation. The council is working intensively to support the remaining nine households in finding homes that meet their needs. We will not rest until all of them have moved into the right homes.

Further to the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) and the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), I am grateful to the work of the independent taskforce for scrutinising the process and bringing some extra pressure to bear. It has been difficult and arduous. I have had several meetings with the council to go through individual cases. I have met residents to understand the barriers that remain and to offer Government support to overcome them. Contractors have been appointed to ensure that any necessary repairs and safety checks are carried out as soon as possible.

The Government have invested and committed £80 million to support the recovery and to support victims, including on their mental health, an issue touched on by the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). I have personally agreed with Grenfell United on a mechanism for escalating cases of undue delay directly either to me or to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service.

The decision to wrap the tower has been a particularly difficult one for the bereaved and the survivors. After consultation with them, the decision was taken to protect the building and reduce the visual impact, while respecting the view that the tower and what happened inside it must never be forgotten. No decision has been taken on the long-term future of the site, but my right hon. Friend, who is the Minister with responsibility for Grenfell victims, has worked with the community to agree the principles to guide the way forward, so that the bereaved, the survivors and the north Kensington community will lead the decision-making process on the future of the site.

Finally, I understand that the forthcoming final report by Dame Judith Hackitt on building regulations and fire safety will be published tomorrow. I reassure the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and others that it will set out recommendations for far-reaching reform of the regulatory system. We will also publish our Green Paper on social housing by the summer recess. That follows the social tenant workshops that we have conducted across the country; the final one, which I attended, was hosted by Grenfell United. That Green Paper was inspired by the *cri de coeur* from the Grenfell community—a challenge to reform social housing and address the stigma and prejudice that too many social tenants face up and down the country.

I share the restlessness of hon. Members across the House to relocate the survivors more swiftly, to bring accountability and justice to this most horrific of tragedies and, ultimately, to bring some solace to those brave souls picking up the pieces of their lives and determined to move on to a brighter future.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House notes the commitments given by the Government that all survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire of 14 June 2017 would be permanently rehoused within one year, that all other tower blocks with dangerous cladding would be made safe, that councils would get the funding needed to carry out remedial work and that there would be significant reform of the current system of building regulations; and calls on the Government to make good on those commitments, to lay a report before Parliament and to make an Oral Statement by 14 June 2018 setting out how it has met those commitments and discharged its wider duties in response to that national disaster.

## Leaving the EU: Customs

4 pm

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, that she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the following papers be laid before the House: all papers, presentations and economic analyses from 1 January 2018 up to and including 16 May 2018 prepared for the European Union Exit and Trade (Strategy and Negotiations) Cabinet sub-committee, and its sub-committees, on the Government's preferred post-Brexit customs arrangements including a Customs Partnership and Maximum Facilitation.

This is, frankly, a desperate state of affairs. We are two years on from the referendum and five months away from the deadline for the withdrawal deal, but the Government still cannot agree on the most basic of Brexit issues: our future customs arrangements. Each week we see a new attempt, and each week we see it fail, with a Cabinet—a war Cabinet—and two Sub-Committees of warring factions. Yesterday we at least saw some agreement: the agreement to kick the ball down the road for another month as the Government agreed to publish a White Paper on their negotiating position, but without any agreement on what will be in it.

The Prime Minister is clearly in a difficult position. Every time she tries to make progress, a Cabinet Minister is waiting to trip her up. As an Opposition, it is tempting for us to dwell on the Government's misfortune but, frankly, this is too important. The lives of millions of people across the country depend on us getting Brexit right, and if the Government cannot, Parliament needs to take responsibility, because there is a majority in this House that believes in a sensible approach to delivering the decision of the referendum. That starts with our customs arrangements, which is why we have tabled this Humble Address motion to seek the publication of the papers and analysis on the Government's two post-Brexit customs options: the Prime Minister's favoured proposal of a customs partnership, which has of course been dismissed by the Foreign Secretary as "crazy"; and the so-called "maximum facilitation" option, which the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy rightly warned would put jobs at risk. Both have faced serious criticisms of their technical detail and may be illegal, according to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office.

The Brexit Secretary, who is unfortunately not in the Chamber, has dismissed the customs partnership as "blue sky thinking", but when looking at the maximum facilitation option, I was struck by his words. I want to quote him precisely:

"Faced with intractable problems with political pressure for a solution, the government reaches for a headline grabbing high-tech 'solution'. Rather than spend the resources, time and thought necessary to get a real answer, they naively grasp solutions that to the technologically illiterate ministers look like magic."

Those were the words of the Brexit Secretary. As it happens, he was speaking in 2008 about ID cards, but was he not prophetic in anticipating today's "intractable" problem? However, it is not intractable; there is a solution.

It is clear to everyone that the Government are in a total mess, locked in a fight over two options, neither of which is practical or acceptable to the EU, but this House has an opportunity to sort out the mess. There is a majority that respects both the result of the referendum

and our duty to protect the livelihoods of the people we represent. The right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) rightly described the conflict in the Cabinet as an "ideological cage fight", adding that Parliament may soon be "making the decisions". Frankly, it would make a better job of it. There is a majority for a new and comprehensive customs union, both here and beyond the House, among all those who recognise the importance of protecting our manufacturing sector, of securing frictionless trade with the EU, and of honouring our obligations on the Good Friday agreement and the border in Ireland.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Paul Blomfield**: I will give way briefly, but I am conscious of time and of the number of Members who wish to speak—interventions will cut into their time.

**Catherine West**: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and I heed his admonition. Does he agree that peace in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is crucial, especially given the background work done by Members on both sides of the Chamber and everyone's heartfelt desire to maintain peace in our time?

**Paul Blomfield**: I would, of course, and I am frankly distressed that those who favour the most destructive Brexit are so casually willing to dismiss that if it gets in the way of their objectives.

Let me return to the breadth of support for a comprehensive customs union outside the House. The director-general of the CBI, Carolyn Fairbairn, has described it as a non-ideological and practical solution. Crucially, she pointed out:

"If we don't break the impasse on this customs decision, everybody will be affected—manufacturers, services companies, retailers. An awful lot hangs on this now."

Her view is shared across business and the trade unions.

Those who seek the deepest possible rupture with the EU, no matter the cost, have been developing their arguments against a customs union, so let me address them. Some have warned that being in a customs union raises prices for food and clothing through the common external tariff. I hope that they will also reflect on the response of British farmers and clothes producers to their idea of unilaterally cutting our tariffs, presumably to zero.

I have also heard the absurd argument that developing countries would be disadvantaged by a customs union with the EU. Current customs arrangements serve developing countries well, as 49 of the poorest countries have tariff-free access to the EU market through the "Everything but Arms" policy. If the approach would be so damaging, perhaps the Government will explain why they propose to replicate the entire EU regime on market access for developing countries—the general system of preferences—after Brexit.

The most frequent objection, of course, is that a customs union would prevent us from signing trade deals with other countries—it would. That sounds significant, but the significance is largely symbolic. We can and do trade with non-EU countries without trade deals. The EU is our biggest trading partner, but the US is our biggest national trading partner, and that is

[Paul Blomfield]

without our having a trade deal. Some people talk about increasing trade with China once we are free of a customs union, but Germany trades four times as much with China as we do.

**Sir Patrick McLoughlin** (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): How helpful does the hon. Gentleman think that the publication of all these documents would be to the people we are trying to negotiate with?

**Paul Blomfield:** The right hon. Gentleman misses the point. He should listen to his own International Trade Secretary, who has talked clearly about a customs union not preventing us from increasing trade.

**Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Paul Blomfield:** I am happy to give way—I enjoy the cut and thrust of debate—but interventions will cut into the time for other Members to speak.

**Jeremy Quin:** The hon. Gentleman talks about missing the point. I do not want to be rude, because he is making an interesting speech about the customs union, but the actual subject of the debate is whether or not these documents should be released. We are talking about an important constitutional precedent. We have been run by Cabinet government since George III. The hon. Gentleman has not even addressed that as an issue.

**Paul Blomfield:** I intend to address it as an issue as I conclude my remarks, so I will come back to that.

The Government's own analysis shows that none of their ambitious proposed new trade deals will go anywhere near compensating for the loss of a customs union with the EU. Free trade agreements with the United States, China, India, Australia, the Gulf and south-east Asia would add just 0.3% to 0.6% to our GDP, but moving to a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU would hit our growth by 5% over the next 15 years. Despite the number of air miles that the International Trade Secretary has clocked up, India has said that it is in no rush to strike a trade deal with us, while Japan has said that it is prioritising the EU for a trade deal.

Working with the EU in the future and seeking deals for a market of 650 million, we can build on the full or partial free trade agreements that we already enjoy with 68 other countries through the EU, as well as the EU deals just concluded with Japan, Singapore and Mexico. If we are confident about our country, and if we are ambitious for its future, we should recognise that we have nothing to fear from a new, comprehensive customs union and everything to gain. It is the best way to support jobs, particularly those 2.1 million in manufacturing, and it is an essential step towards avoiding a hard border in Northern Ireland.

When we previously heard the argument about playing into the hands of those with whom we are negotiating in the EU27, it was as bogus in relation to the other papers that have been released as it is to these papers. Members who insist on a customs partnership or the maximum facilitation model should be confident that the Cabinet papers will stand up to parliamentary scrutiny,

and the constraints that were laid down previously provide for the confidentiality that is right for this place. Others who share concerns about those models should also want them to be subjected to proper scrutiny.

This is one of the most important decisions faced by the country since the second world war, but the Cabinet is unable to agree. Parliament therefore has a deep responsibility to stand up for the people whom we represent, and we need access to the information in order to do so. I hope that the House will approve the motion.

4.13 pm

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington):** I felt that the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), while setting out as best he could the Opposition's approach to various aspects of European policy, rather neglected to address the key significance of the motion that the Opposition have tabled, which is about the requirement for the public disclosure of current Cabinet Committee papers and which raises important matters of constitutional principle.

The House should not mistake me: I believe passionately in the accountability of Ministers to Parliament. No Minister who possesses a grain of sense approaches questions in the Chamber, let alone a Select Committee evidence session, without a strong sense of trepidation. I still remember what I learned, many years ago in my first Parliament, from watching that magnificent parliamentarian the late Gwyneth Dunwoody using questions and interventions during Committee sessions to spear Ministers who had not bothered to master their brief before appearing in front of her. So I believe in Parliament, but I also believe strongly in Cabinet government, and in the proper constitutional relationship between Government and Parliament. Of course, as Ministers we have a duty to keep Parliament informed about Government policy, but effective Cabinet government also relies upon certain principles.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Lidington:** I will give way to the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and then to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), and then I will make progress.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): If the right hon. Gentleman is such a believer in Cabinet collective responsibility, what does he make of the conduct of the Foreign Secretary, who continually and consistently undermines the Prime Minister and her position? What does he think will do more damage to our negotiating position: publishing some documents or the conduct of an incompetent Foreign Secretary?

**Mr Lidington:** I will explain later why I believe the implications of the Opposition motion would be extremely damaging for the quality of Government decisions under Governments of any party.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): I fully support the position the Minister is taking. Does he recall that when Labour Governments were giving away powers of self-government right, left and centre at Nice, Amsterdam

and Lisbon, they never shared their reasons or the negotiations they had beforehand, even though the issues were deeply contentious among Conservative Members and led directly to the vote to leave the European Union?

**Mr Lidington:** Wishes are always expressed by Members, usually those in the Opposition parties at any given time, for Governments to divulge more about internal discussions between Ministers, but I think the right constitutional principle is that the roles of both the Executive and Parliament need to be respected.

Three key principles are at issue in this debate. First, there is the need for confidential and frank discussion between Ministers in Cabinet and Cabinet Committees, and after eight years in Government one general truth that I have learned is that a policy proposal almost always benefits from discussion among colleagues, who bring different perspectives and interests to bear.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Lidington:** I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), and then I really must make some progress.

**Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Ind): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful argument, but beyond the doctrine of collective responsibility and making sure that one can have conversations in government, in what world does it make sense that we should disclose our own Government papers—our own Government secrets—to the other side in a negotiation?

**Mr Lidington:** I will want to say a bit more on that point in a few minutes, but first I want to finish what I have to say about collective responsibility.

Discussions between Ministers need to be frank. That was very well set out by a former very senior Labour Secretary of State, Jack Straw, in a statement that was quoted with approval by the Chilcot committee in its report. Mr Straw said in 2009, in explaining a Cabinet decision to veto the release of minutes of one of its meetings, that dialogue in Cabinet and Cabinet Committee “must be fearless. Ministers must have the confidence to challenge each other in private. They must ensure that decisions have been properly thought through, sounding out all possibilities before committing themselves to a course of action...They must not be deflected from expressing dissent by the fear that they may be held personally to account for views that are later cast aside.”

Those were principles that previous Labour Governments upheld in fulfilling the responsibilities of government, and it is a measure of how far today’s Labour leadership has fallen that it should be abandoning those principles today. We cannot have that kind of honest, open discussion in Cabinet or Cabinet Committee if people know that at any time their views could be made public by means of a resolution of the House.

The second principle—

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Lidington:** I am not giving way at the moment.

The second principle is that officials must be able to give frank advice to Ministers in confidence. That includes memorandums and other papers provided to Cabinet

Committees by some of the most senior officials in the civil service. There are Labour Members present who have themselves served in government; they know that those in the professional civil service used every ounce of their professional skill to help them, as Labour Ministers, deliver the objectives of the elected Governments in which they served. I have to ask: what would those Members say to those officials about a motion that might result in the making public of the advice of professional civil servants—people who of course can never answer back themselves—which they had thought was being given to Ministers in confidence?

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): Does the Minister accept, though, that his argument is fatally undermined by the fact that members of the Cabinet are discussing these matters in public, in the newspapers?

**Mr Lidington:** I am deeply old-fashioned in my views, and I believe it is an enormous privilege to serve in a Cabinet. I also believe that discussions should be frank and unconstrained within the Cabinet, and that Cabinet Ministers should agree on a collective Government policy and be prepared to defend that policy in public afterwards.

**Sir Patrick McLoughlin:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that if such a motion were to be passed, less would be said in Cabinet papers and they would no longer contain the same candour? That is something that we should try to get away from. We had quite a bit of it between 1997 and 2010, when decisions were not taken through collective Cabinet responsibility.

**Mr Lidington:** My right hon. Friend speaks from experience, and he is completely accurate in what he says.

The third principle was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Dover when he talked about international relations. All Governments have to negotiate with other sovereign Governments and with international organisations, and it is a cardinal principle of our system of government that Ministers and officials need to be able to prepare the British negotiating position in private. Indeed, as recently as December 2016, that was also the view of the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who said:

“I fully accept that the Government will enter into confidential negotiations...I do...accept that there is a level of detail and of confidential issues and tactics that should not be disclosed, and I have never said otherwise.”—[*Official Report*, 7 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 223.]

It is a source of sadness to me that he appears to have departed from that position in lending his name to the motion on the Order Paper today. I would be happy to take an intervention from him if he wishes to explain to the House why he has abandoned the view that he championed two years ago.

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): The position I set out was in relation to a motion with pretty much the same terms as this. It was accepted that there was a degree of confidentiality. The argument that is being made now is the very argument that was made then about not disclosing papers that are all in the public domain now.

**Mr Lidington:** I think the right hon. and learned Gentleman was indulging in a bit of medieval scholasticism there. That was not persuasive. I do not know whether he is now fearful of the Trots in his constituency who are working to deselect him. I do not know what has caused him to abandon the principles that he once stood by. The principles that he stood by in 2016 are the ones that Labour Governments of the past have followed, and I just wish that the Labour party would live up to those principles today.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): On that point, is there not an issue of consistency involved? Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, which was passed by a Labour Government, there is a deliberate and necessary exemption for confidential information. It would create complete confusion and inconsistency if that principle were to be breached now.

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend is right. The Freedom of Information Act 2000—brought in, let us not forget, by a Labour Government—specifically provides exceptions from the freedom of information rules for Cabinet and Cabinet Committee papers, for advice from officials to Ministers and for information that might harm our diplomatic relationships and negotiations. The wording of the ministerial code expresses the balance between the different duties of Government of accountability to Parliament and of confidentiality in developing Government policy. That is why the code explicitly provides that Ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament and the public, notes that we should refuse to provide information only when disclosure would not be in the public interest, and says that that judgment should be made in accordance with the relevant statutes and the Freedom of Information Act 2000—so including the exceptions I mentioned.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Lidington:** I have already given way quite a few times, and I am conscious of the large number of right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House who have expressed a wish to participate in the debate.

Turning to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), the candour of everybody involved, whether Ministers or officials, would be affected if they thought that the content of their discussions would be disclosed prematurely. Frankly, if details of discussions were routinely made public—

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab) *rose*—

**Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab) *rose*—

**Mr Lidington:** No, I am not giving way at the moment.

If such details were made public, Ministers would feel inhibited from being frank and candid with one another. As a result, the quality of the debate that underlies collective decision making would decline significantly. That is not in the interests of any Government of any political party, and it is not in the interests of our constitutional democracy. Such discussions also need to be underpinned by full and frank advice on policy options and their implications. No Government of the past have tried to operate in an environment where

papers can be finalised and distributed to members of a Cabinet Committee one week and then made public the next. It is simply not possible to do so and not responsible to pursue that as an objective.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales, I invite the House to consider the situation were we to accept the Opposition motion and adopt the practices that the motion embodies. If the motion were carried and the situation that the hon. Member for Sheffield Central advocated became the standard practice governing relations between the Executive and Parliament, we would soon see a deterioration in the quality of policy making within Government, and not greater but significantly less transparency. Indeed, that point was made by Mr Jack Straw, a former Labour Home Secretary, Lord Chancellor and Justice Secretary, Leader of the House and Foreign Secretary, when he said about regimes that did not have the kind of exceptions to disclosure that are in the Freedom of Information Act:

“The paradox of their situation is that, far from that leading to an increase in the accountability of Ministers and decision makers, it has reduced accountability because it has cut the audit trail. Officials and Ministers have gone in for Post-it notes and oral decisions which should have been properly recorded, or for devices for ordaining all sorts of documents which have nothing to do with the Cabinet or Cabinet Committees as Cabinet documents.”—*[Official Report, 24 May 1999; Vol. 332, c. 31.]*

It was precisely those practices of avoiding the formality of Cabinet and Cabinet Committee agendas, papers and minutes that were severely criticised by both the Butler commission in 2004 and the Chilcot inquiry in 2016. I regret the fact that the Opposition’s motion appears to be moving towards backing a situation in which all those flaws identified by Chilcot and Butler would be reproduced in the future, and I hope that we do not go in that direction.

The justification that we have heard for the motion is that there are special circumstances, but I simply reject the idea that the Government have been insufficiently transparent on the issues in question. On the conduct of the negotiations, the Prime Minister has made important speeches at every stage to set out our approach. We published two White Papers and a series of papers last summer and autumn to set out further details. In December, the Government and the European Commission published a joint report to set out the progress made in the negotiations. The text of the draft withdrawal agreement is in the public domain. We announced only yesterday that we shall publish a new White Paper next month on our proposed future relationship with the European Union. There are six Brexit-related Bills before Parliament, all of which, as usual, are accompanied by impact assessments.

Select Committees have been able to scrutinise our plans for exit, as the more than 100 Select Committee inquiries into such matters testify, and the Government have engaged with all those inquiries. We have provided written evidence, and Ministers and officials have appeared for questioning. The Prime Minister has come to this House on numerous occasions to give statements on EU summits. Department for Exiting the European Union Ministers alone have given evidence to Committees on 35 occasions and have made no fewer than 85 written statements during the lifetime of their Department. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has given 10 oral statements to the full House of Commons during the time he has held office.

It would not be in the national interest to release information that will form part of our negotiating position. In order to ensure good governance, it is in the interest of all of us, including those who might have the ambition of serving at some very distant date in a Labour Government, to preserve the system of Cabinet government that allows for good and well thought through decisions.

For those reasons, I have no hesitation in asking my right hon. and hon. Friends to oppose the motion before the House today.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. As Members can see, a large number of colleagues want to participate, so there will be a four-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions.

4.31 pm

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

I was going to say that I stand here with a sense of déjà vu, but perhaps I should say “already seen” in case I upset those who want to purge these lands of all trace of foreign influence. The SNP will be supporting the motion, but what does it say about this so-called mother of Parliaments that we have to keep going through such a ridiculous medieval charade—another French word—just to get the Government to provide Parliament with the information we need to do the job we have been elected to do?

We will debate the motion until 7 o’clock, when we now know the Government will frogmarch their obedient little minions through the Lobby to oppose it. The motion probably will not be carried, but even if it were carried, we would spend the next six months raising points of order to argue over 14th-century precedent as to whether the Government actually need to pay a blind bit of attention to anything this Parliament might say.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Peter Grant:** The hon. Gentleman has just been advised of how little time there is for debate. If he has his name down to speak, he will get his time. If he has not put his name down to speak, I am sorry, but those who have put their name down get precedence.

Would it not be so much better if the Government were simply prepared to trust Parliament with that information in the first place? The Government’s response was not only predictable but was so predictable that I wrote what I am saying now before they responded. They say there is a long-established convention that Cabinet papers are confidential. They say routine publication would prejudice the smooth and efficient operation of Government. They say that publication would place in the public domain sensitive information that could compromise our negotiating position.

I accept there are occasions, maybe the majority of occasions, when any or all of those considerations should predominate and the balance of argument should be against disclosure, but the motion before us does not ask for the automatic release of everything the Cabinet

ever does; it asks for the release of some papers in relation to Brexit that the Opposition, including the SNP, believe need to be made available to Parliament in the unique circumstances in which we now find ourselves.

The Government keep telling us we are in an unprecedented situation, and then they ask us to be dictated to by precedent in a situation that is unprecedented. Yes, the confidentiality of Cabinet papers is an ancient convention. In fact, we are reminded that the convention goes back to the days of King George III—that great, wise and all-caring monarch whose glorious reign has been immortalised in film as “The Madness of King George”. What better metaphor could we have for the Brexit process?

If the Government are so thirled to sticking to the fine detail of these honourable conventions, why on earth has the Foreign Secretary still got a job? He has earned more red and yellow cards in two years than Vinnie Jones did in his entire career, but he is still on the pitch—the Foreign Secretary is not on the subs bench just now, obviously—arguing in public with the manager over what the team tactics should be, while some of his colleagues try desperately to calm him down before he gets suspended permanently. In the interests of strict accuracy, I should say that Vinnie Jones is only ninth in the world record list for red cards—or 10th, if we include the Foreign Secretary.

We must also consider the argument that releasing these papers would not be conducive to the smooth and efficient running of Government business. We do not need to release Cabinet papers to prevent the smooth and efficient running of Government business, as the Cabinet is perfectly capable of doing that for itself. The main Opposition party tabled this motion because it is becoming terrifyingly clear that those in the Cabinet are making a bigger mess of the Brexit process every time they meet to try to fix it.

**James Cartlidge:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Peter Grant:** I will give way this once, as the hon. Gentleman has been very persistent.

**James Cartlidge:** That is very kind. Does the hon. Gentleman think the Scottish Government should disclose all of their confidential papers?

**Peter Grant:** If the hon. Gentleman had listened, he would have heard me make it clear that I am not arguing, and neither is the motion, that this should be regarded as routine, automatic or standard practice; this is a request in a specific instance. I will explain why in this instance and on this matter those in the Cabinet have shown themselves incapable of fixing it by themselves. We do not need a Humble Address to mess up the smooth and efficient running of Government business; we only need Cabinet Committees and Sub-Committees in order to do that, as they can do it perfectly well. The Government’s arguments might carry some weight if they could point to some kind of progress—there has been some but not nearly enough. Almost two years after the decision was taken to leave the EU, and five months before, as we know, we need agreement on the Government’s preferred solutions, we do not know even what their preferred solutions are, because they cannot agree on them. Those in the Cabinet are too

[Peter Grant]

busy fighting among themselves, jockeying for position for when the Prime Minister goes, willingly or unwillingly. Almost the only thing they can agree on is that this mess is everybody's fault but their own.

As for the Government's non-plans for our future customs relationship, here is what we know: we know that the Prime Minister's plans are "crazy"; we know there are "significant question marks" over whether they can be delivered on time; we know that the Foreign Secretary is undermining the negotiations; and we know that thousands of people in the car industry could lose their jobs if the Government get it wrong. We know all that because it is what Cabinet Ministers are already telling us in public. If what they are saying in private is more damaging to our negotiating stance than what they are saying in public, heaven help us. Those quotes have come from serving Cabinet Ministers within the past 10 days—that is what they are saying in public. It is hard to believe that what they are saying in private can be so much more damaging that they cannot be allowed to say it—

**Lady Hermon** (North Down) (Ind) *rose*—

**Peter Grant:** I am sorry, but I did say I was taking only one intervention.

We have a Government who claim to be taking back control but who are now seen to be running completely out of control. They claim to be restoring parliamentary sovereignty, for those parts of these islands where such a strange idea actually holds any sway, but they are at best failing to co-operate with and at worst appear to be wilfully obstructing Parliament's attempts to hold them to account. The ducking and diving that went on with respect to a previous Humble Address, on the Brexit analysis papers, has been discussed often enough that we do not need to repeat it now. We also know that the Government are still trying to avoid complying with a recommendation from the Public Accounts Committee's 18th report, published more than three months ago, that they publish details of what work Departments are doing to prepare for Brexit. Two weeks ago, the Chair of the Brexit Select Committee had to take the highly unusual step of publicly rebuking the Secretary of State for not giving proper priority to making him and his civil servants available to give evidence to the Committee. There are probably other instances going on right now, which are not yet in the public domain, where individual members of particular Select Committees will know that their Committees and their Chairs are losing patience with Ministers for either not being available to be questioned or for not providing information on time.

This morning, a hard-hitting report was published by the Work and Pensions Committee and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee on the collapse of Carillion. In normal circumstances, it would have attracted huge attention. A lot of people have not noticed it yet because there are so many other Government failures, Government U-turns and Government fall-outs going on that it is difficult to keep on top of all of them. In publishing that report, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee Chair, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), said:

"The company's delusional directors drove Carillion off a cliff and then tried to blame everyone but themselves".

I hope that she has registered that remark for royalties because I think it will be used an awful lot in future to describe the Cabinet's handling of Brexit.

The Cabinet has miserably failed in its responsibility to introduce credible proposals to avoid what the Prime Minister described as a cliff edge. I suggest that we do for the Cabinet what the Cabinet would do for a failing council or health authority: it is time for this Parliament to take back control and put the Cabinet into special measures.

I do not just want the Cabinet to give us the information. The Cabinet is clearly incapable of taking a decision anywhere near on time, so as well as giving us the information, why not give Parliament the decision? Why not respect the sovereignty, as they call it, of Parliament? Why not agree to a free vote in this place on the customs union? I will tell you why, Madam Deputy Speaker: the Government know what the result would be. It would not be consistent with their red lines or anything that appears in existing Government papers.

Let us have that free vote on the customs union. The European Research Group can quietly go away and spontaneously combust when they see the result and the rest of us can concentrate on turning the bus round before it disappears over the Prime Minister's cliff edge.

4.40 pm

**Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): I am happy to follow the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) and I will unashamedly speak on many of the issues that he has mentioned.

I reject the blatant attack by Opposition Members on the functioning of the Government. Today, we see an attempt to undermine our negotiations with the EU. The Opposition will use any means, including a Humble Address, to try to force the Government to reveal their hand. I would have thought that a party so involved with trade unions would be expert at negotiation. Do Opposition Members not respect the referendum result? Are they simply playing politics during a vital negotiation? Industry and constituents alike want us to get on with it, yet here we are again, with the Opposition trying to frustrate the process.

If the Opposition want to avoid a so-called hard Brexit, why are they undermining the negotiations?

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Colin Clark:** I will, unlike the hon. Member for Glenrothes.

**Neil Gray:** I struggle to understand how the hon. Gentleman can suggest that Opposition Members are frustrating the negotiating position when the Foreign Secretary has to be asked whether he still believes in Cabinet collective responsibility. Will he elaborate?

**Colin Clark:** Given that I have not been elevated to the lofty heights of Cabinet—one day, we never know, I may be—I am unfortunately unable to answer the question for the Foreign Secretary. I am sure that the next time my right hon. Friend is in his place, the hon. Gentleman can ask him himself.

Yesterday in Holyrood, the Scottish National party Government refused to give a legislative consent memorandum to the European Union (Withdrawal)

Bill, despite months of negotiation, despite Mike Russell, the Brexit Minister, saying that he was near to a deal, and despite SNP MSPs who would like to be pragmatic about a deal.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that if the minutes of the Scottish Cabinet were to be released to the public, they would contain only four words: “We agree with Nicola”?

**Colin Clark**: I can always rely on my hon. Friend to get to the nub of the matter.

The Government in Holyrood are deliberately undermining the UK negotiations, and I am flabbergasted that the Scottish Labour party and the Scottish Liberal Democrats have supported the nationalists, disregarding the 2015 Scottish independence referendum and ignoring the Brexit referendum for narrow political gain. That is also why we are here today: for narrow political gain.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman explain at which point during the referendum debate we heard about maximum facilitation proposals or a customs arrangement?

**Colin Clark**: Unlike Opposition Members, I respect the British people and representative democracy. I trust the Conservative Government to put forward proposals to the British people. The great thing about the British system is that it is a democracy, we will have other elections and we shall be judged on how we deliver Brexit. Conservative Members intend to deliver Brexit and respect the Brexit vote.

Many Opposition Members have held Government positions and the SNP is in government in Scotland, so how can they possibly support the motion? How can they countenance exposing the Government’s negotiating position? How can those members of the official Opposition who have held Government positions possibly table a motion such as this to undermine the Government, knowing, as they do, about the delivery of government? As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) said, would the Scottish Government seriously consider giving us their confidential papers and information about their confidential conversations?

**Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): Included among the papers called for in the motion is the economic analysis. The Scottish Government have published their economic analysis; the UK Government have not.

**Colin Clark**: It is quite remarkable that the hon. Gentleman speaks about Scotland’s economic papers and performance, when Scotland is now the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom, which he is knowingly damaging. It is not Brexit that is damaging the Scottish economy, but the SNP’s determination to make Scotland a poor place for inward investment. I come from Aberdeen, like my hon. Friend sitting in front of me, the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), and it is the most productive part of Scotland. It is quite remarkable how well Aberdeenshire is still doing, despite the Scottish Government.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) asked of the hon. Member for Glenrothes, would the Scottish Government release their papers?

I would be fascinated to see the papers that have passed between the Scottish Brexit Minister, Mike Russell, and the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, because as we are seeing today, they have set out to frustrate the Government’s negotiation with the EU. We all want the best deal. As parliamentarians, we should see that the motion seeks simply to undermine the Government. I cannot support it.

4.46 pm

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark). He said in the middle of his remarks that he would not expect the Government to expose their negotiating position to the people with whom they are negotiating. I was under the impression that the Government did not have a negotiating position, because the Cabinet certainly cannot agree on one. They would expose the position that they have no negotiating position.

Why are we discussing the release of papers? Let us look at the substantive issue. We are six months away from having to have on the table a final deal, which will then have to go through the EU27 and, indeed, through this place, if we are to have a meaningful vote. There are only two more formal EU summits left until this process has to conclude. The Government triggered article 50 with no idea about which direction they wished to go, and the journey has certainly taken them down many cul-de-sacs and dead ends.

We still do not even have a Cabinet position on this issue. To a certain extent, I can agree with the Minister, who spoke for 20 minutes and did not mention the Government’s position on the customs arrangement at all. I can appreciate slightly that he would not want what the Cabinet were saying to each other in private to be released, but all we have to do is pick up a copy of *The Daily Telegraph* or, indeed, run close enough—if we can run slowly enough—to the Foreign Secretary and listen to what he is saying to journalists as he briefs them behind the Prime Minister’s back. This is a Government and a Cabinet in complete and utter chaos.

We have the unedifying spectacle of the Prime Minister trying to push her favoured customs partnership model to the Cabinet, but the Cabinet cannot agree on it. We then have the Brexiteers in the Cabinet saying that they would rather have this maximum facilitation—we are back to facilitation again, whatever that would mean in a customs context—and the Foreign Secretary calling the Prime Minister’s goals “crazy”. The Prime Minister is too weak to sack or gag the Foreign Secretary—the worst Foreign Secretary that this country has ever had bestowed on it.

Amid all that, the EU negotiators had, in their words, subjected to  
“systematic and forensic annihilation”

both proposals on which the Cabinet cannot even agree. We have a situation in which, to all intents and purposes, the Prime Minister could persuade the Cabinet to back her customs partnership or, indeed, fold to maximum facilitation, but the EU is saying, “Well, we’re not going to agree to it in the first place,” so all that effort was in vain.

It is really important for the public to see the evidence, the economic indicators, the discussion and the trajectory of the Government for the simple reason that this will

[Ian Murray]

cost jobs and economic growth. Even the Brexit Secretary's special adviser has said that it will cost the country £25 billion a year to 2030. Indeed, the Treasury itself has said that it could cost up to £55 billion a year by 2033 if we follow World Trade Organisation rules. That is why we need this information in the public domain and why I have been championing a people's vote on the final deal. It does not matter whether someone voted remain and was a strong remainer, or voted leave and was a strong leaver, because, if we have the evidence in front of us, it would be democratically right for the public to be shown that evidence, so that they can compare it with what we have now and, in the light of that evidence in front of them, we can ask them whether they wish to go down the route that this chaotic Government are trying to negotiate.

The reason why the Government are not putting these papers out has nothing to do with confidentiality of Cabinet discussions. It is because they have nothing to put out, because, first, they cannot agree and, secondly, even if they could agree, it is not in the best interests of this country. As we have always seen with this Conservative Government, they put party and ambition for No.10 first and the country second.

4.50 pm

**Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con):** The Minister for the Cabinet Office put very well the argument about why we need to keep Cabinet confidentiality. It is an essential part of what the Government of the UK should be doing whenever they are negotiating a treaty or any international matters of substance. Quite frankly, it is an absurd idea that this House should be making them look over their shoulder at every single step and unsure about how to proceed.

This Humble Address procedure is archaic and it is being abused here. It is actually quite a childish approach. Before its recent incarnation, it had not been used since the middle of the 19th century. At the beginning of the 19th century, there was absolutely no way that Parliament would seek to get the reasons, the tactics and the assessments of our military commanders at Waterloo or Trafalgar. It is quite absurd that this Parliament now should be trying to undermine the Government's negotiating position.

Our constituents depend on our Government being able to negotiate well on our behalf. They rely on our Government, and confidentiality in these discussions is needed to allow the Government and civil servants the space to make arguments without fear or favour. That would certainly be at risk if this process continues to be abused.

The terms of the motion do not even stand up. I would like your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, on whether the motion in these terms is in fact valid. As I understand it, this type of Humble Address is designed for the Privy Council, or for a Secretary of State and departmental documents; it is not designed for the Cabinet.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. Let me just reassure the hon. Gentleman that the motion would not be on the Order Paper if it was either out of order or invalid.

**Mr Fysh:** Obviously, I accept that position, but may I just say that that is not what it says in Erskine May? [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] I am just reflecting—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is not questioning the judgment of the Chair.

**Mr Fysh:** Indeed I am not. I would never do that. What I am saying is that there is a provision in Erskine May for Parliament to seek an order of the House to release certain documents. I accept that this may be a grey area—an evolving area—of parliamentary procedure. None the less, I genuinely think that it goes to the heart of what the Opposition are trying to do. They are simply trying to undermine the Government's position and the national interest of our country. That is truly unacceptable and they should withdraw their motion.

4.54 pm

**Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind):** I have to say to the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) that it was never a good idea to attack Labour's former Chief Whip.

As a remainer, but also a democrat, my view following the referendum was that we had to respect the will of the people. That meant supporting the Government to trigger article 50, allowing the process of negotiations to begin as soon as possible and offering support to the Government on Brexit if they were acting in the national interest. Any Government post referendum would have had to begin the negotiating process to leave the EU quickly, and any Government would not have found those negotiations easy. However, what we have seen so far from this Government is a shambles that has made this country a laughing stock and damaged business and public confidence in our future.

As hon. Members have said, the specific issue that is the subject of today's debate highlights the daily farce that we now experience. The Prime Minister has been unable to persuade her own Cabinet to support her preferred customs model and the Brexiteers have united around their own alternative. She sought to resolve this by setting up Cabinet working parties to assess the veracity of each option. Presumably, our future customs arrangements will be decided by a kind of "Dragons' Den".

When the Foreign Secretary briefs a newspaper that the Prime Minister's preferred model is "crazy", he is not sacked. Instead, the Health Secretary is sent on the airwaves to tell the Foreign Secretary, via the media, to shut up. The Prime Minister claims that stability in Northern Ireland and the Good Friday agreement must be protected by ensuring that there is no hard border. Her allies are then sent out to threaten a border poll if the Cabinet does not support her preferred option—so much for the Conservative and Unionist party. Now we hear that the Government intend to produce a Brexit White Paper, setting out their position on the key issues. Surely, other than in this incompetent Government, this White Paper should have been published at the beginning of the process, not halfway through.

The truth is that, with the referendum commitment, none of this is about the national interest. It is about party management within the Conservative party. The Prime Minister is permanently conflicted between keeping the Brexiteers happy and saving her job, and acting in

the national interest on the customs union and the single market to ensure that she does not lose a fragile parliamentary majority. I accept that many Brexiteers believe that they are acting in the country's interests, but some judge every decision through the prism of their political ambitions to lead a party with a ferociously anti-European membership.

The decisions that we are taking now are probably the most important in peacetime. They are far too important to be left to a Government paralysed by weakness, division and personal ambition. That is why Parliament must now fill the vacuum being left, step up to the plate and build a coalition around the national interest. This means adopting negotiating positions that will do the least damage to United Kingdom businesses' trade with the European Union, being part of a comprehensive customs union and doing nothing that will undermine stability in Northern Ireland. Of course, ultimately, the decisions of the Commons must prevail, but it is right that the House of Lords fulfils its scrutiny role. It is frankly laughable to hear right-wing Conservatives who were always opposed to modernisation now calling for the Lords to do what they are told or run the risk of abolition. They simply do not have any sense of irony.

We face the biggest peacetime challenge, other than post war, in our history. More than ever we need politicians who can provide the leadership that this country needs. The Government have failed, so Parliament must now step up to the plate. It is true that the majority voted to leave the European Union, but this did not give any of us a mandate to allow ideological extremism to consign this country to decades of slow growth, wasted potential and permanent instability.

4.58 pm

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Surely the key question that we should be asking ourselves is whether, if Parliament were to pass this motion and the information were to be released, it would undermine our negotiating position. I would argue that that is most certainly the case. Of course it is the aim and objective of those who support the remain cause that the EU will give us the worst possible terms and that, as a result, we will go on to reject an agreement, but there are also practical reasons, and political judgments have to be made.

What do we know already? We know that the Government are intent on delivering the Brexit that was determined by the referendum. We know that they will bring back control of our money, borders and laws to this House, rather than their being based in Brussels. In doing that, they intend to ensure that trade between ourselves and the EU is as frictionless as possible, that we avoid a hard border in Ireland, and that we establish an independent trade policy.

What do we know about the facts and figures? We know that in 2016 we had a trade deficit with the EU of £71 billion. In that same year, the UK had a trade surplus with the rest of the world of £34 billion. The European Commission has predicted that 90% of world economic growth over the next 10 to 15 years will come from outside the European Union, so surely our focus should be on countries outside the EU.

**Wes Streeting**: This is just total fantasy stuff. The idea that we do not presently trade with the rest of the world is just laughable. Through the European Union,

we have trade agreements with the rest of the world, and the reality is that leaving the customs union and the single market will diminish our ability to carry out such trade. As a London MP, I find this unbelievable. My city will be all right post-Brexit—it will not be easy, but it will be all right. However, communities such as the hon. Gentleman's—big fishing communities—are going to be absolutely hammered. What on earth is he doing by justifying the absurdity of the Government's policy?

**Martin Vickers**: For the hon. Gentleman even to suggest that the fishing industry has in some way benefited from our membership of the European Union is simply laughable. I would gladly invite him to my constituency so that he can meet the people who were involved in the fishing industry. Very few of them are involved in it now because of the European Union.

To go back to the facts and figures that I quoted, it is noteworthy that only this week Liam Halligan asked in *The Sunday Telegraph* why, if the customs union is so vital to Britain, we are running a massive trade deficit inside it but a large surplus with nations outside it. We need to ensure that we are able to set our own trade policies so that we can trade freely with the expanding economies in the world, and the reality is that those economies are not in the European Union. We have to widen our horizons. The success of Britain has always been our free trade with the world as a whole.

**Wera Hobhouse**: Can the hon. Gentleman specify which countries he has in mind when he talks about these wonderful free trade arrangements that we are going to have?

**Martin Vickers**: I am not listing the countries. I am saying that the main growth in world trade is outside the European Union, and that should be our focus. I do not know whether the hon. Lady has travelled to the far east, South America or some of the African nations that are expanding. By dealing with the developing nations, we are supporting the poorer parts of the world. As a Liberal Democrat, surely she should be behind such proposals.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Martin Vickers**: No. I have given way twice already and I recognise that time is running out.

As I said, the Government have made clear their intentions and how they intend to improve things. They have been very clear that we will leave the customs union in March 2019. Any attempt to thwart that is an attack on the democratic process and the clearly defined will of the British people. Some 70% of people in my constituency voted for leave. They did not vote for half-leave, which is what Opposition Members who want to remain in the single market or a customs union are trying to achieve. They wanted to leave full stop—absolutely and completely.

There are many mechanisms that can be used at the border. We can use pre-notification schemes such as that of the World Customs Organisation and the EU's authorised economic operator scheme. Those mechanisms are operating and have been tested. The border between Switzerland and the EU is crossed by many more people

[*Martin Vickers*]

and vehicles than the Irish border. It is not beyond the wit of this Government and this Parliament to come up with a solution. I am confident that a solution can be found. We voted to leave, not to half leave. The motion would undermine our negotiating position and should be rejected out of hand.

5.5 pm

**Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is nearly two years since the Brexit referendum, and there are just 316 days to go until the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. I support the Opposition's motion because the in-fighting and indecision in government is holding back the Brexit negotiations and delaying crucial votes in Parliament. Labour recognises that the only way to ensure that we have the frictionless trade necessary to support our vital manufacturing industries is to secure a new comprehensive UK-EU customs union. A customs union not only is the best way to prevent a hard border in Northern Ireland, but has wide support from the business community and trade unions.

Some 247,000 EU citizens live in the west midlands region, and there are 87,000 across the Greater Birmingham area. The west midlands' 10 universities attract more than 8,000 EU students each year and employ approximately 5,000 academics who are EU citizens. My constituency is home to both the University of Birmingham and Newman University, and I am proud that many of the students and academics from those great institutions choose to make their home in Edgbaston. However, I wish to focus my comments on business and specifically manufacturing, which are why the release of these papers is key.

The Conservative Mayor of the West Midlands said in an article this week that hard-line Brexiteers risk causing the "unintended destruction" of thousands of jobs in the region's automotive industry—he was right. The automotive industry employs more than 50,000 people across the region in firms such as Jaguar Land Rover, Aston Martin, BMW and London Taxi Company. There are also numerous component companies such as GKN based in Birmingham. Those companies' fortunes are inextricably linked to the ability to move goods and parts between the UK and Europe.

The port of Dover handles £122 billion of the UK's trade in goods in 2.6 million freight vehicles, and 99% of that freight traffic comes from the EU. The port has estimated that, given the lack of physical space, even a two-minute delay to check each vehicle would lead to 17-mile queues on either side of the channel. That is exactly the type of delay that would adversely affect companies in the west midlands, as their products often require several trips across the channel before completion.

Nearly 40% of JLR's global suppliers are based in Europe. Those suppliers are crucial to the success of JLR, and without their timely and competitively priced parts, production at JLR and all other manufacturers would simply grind to a halt. With seatbelts supplied by Bosch and made in Germany, plastic sealing made in the Czech Republic, wheels from Germany and brake hoses from Spain, it is quite clear that the production of a modern British car relies on an interconnected web of European automotive suppliers. The west midlands has one of the highest shares of goods imports coming

from the EU, and 47% of goods exports from the west midlands go to the EU. The region's higher-than-average reliance on the manufacturing sector, and automotive manufacturing in particular, makes it even more reliant on trade than other areas.

The message from businesses in the west midlands is clear: we need a deal, and we need a deal that works for business. Labour is clear that that deal is a customs union. The west midlands already has higher unemployment and a higher proportion of people with low or no qualifications than the UK average. My constituents simply cannot afford any more barriers to be put in their way when they are seeking employment, and by not entering a customs union, the Government are doing just that. Members of the Cabinet need to put aside their petty differences and rigid ideologies, overcome their stubbornness, and focus on what matters, which is the jobs of people in the west midlands and across the country.

5.9 pm

**Ross Thomson** (Aberdeen South) (Con): When the UK voted to leave the EU, the UK voted to rejoin the rest of the world. The great Brexit prize will be our regaining our ability to strike new free trade deals across the globe, leading the world as a free trading nation, championing trade liberalisation, and directly taking on those who advocate protectionism. If we were to take the advice of some of our colleagues in the Lords or even right here in the Commons, we would find ourselves a vassal state, shackled to the rules of the customs union and unable to set our own trade policy, while not only being absent from the table, but out of the room when decisions affecting us are taken, which is the very worst of all worlds.

The Prime Minister has been clear that we are leaving the customs union, but what has been astonishing is the hokey-cokey approach to the customs union adopted by Labour Members: in out, in out, shake the shadow Cabinet all about. They are now taking a position that means that the UK will not be able to set its own independent trade policy. Labour peers have tried to frustrate the Brexit process, while Labour would keep us following EU rules with no say. Some Labour MPs want to keep us in the single market permanently.

**Jeremy Quin**: Like my hon. Friend, I have been very interested in the shenanigans within the Labour party. I know that Labour Members are all fair and decent-minded people, and I therefore trust that they will be releasing all the shadow Cabinet papers regarding their deliberations on this issue. Does he agree?

**Ross Thomson**: I wholeheartedly agree. If Labour Members think it is good enough for the Government to do this, it is certainly good enough for the shadow Cabinet.

Labour still refuses to commit to ending free movement. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) raised the issue of the border with Ireland in relation to "max fac". Let us be clear that this approach relies on electronic customs clearing, which is standard practice across the EU, following World Customs Organisation principles.

I draw Members' attention to the EU's own customs expert, Lars Karlsson, who in evidence to the Brexit Committee said that using new technology is not in

itself new. GPS technology, which most motorists already carry in their cars, has been available for years. Such technology is already in use for the mass tracking of vehicles, and it is used by the likes of Network Rail, and by Uber for taxis. Furthermore, we could extend the authorised economic operator or trusted trader schemes for reputable companies, such as Guinness, which already, despite the different excise duties, has many lorries crossing the Irish border that do not need ever to be stopped. Beyond the scaremongering, an Irish border without any infrastructure is absolutely possible, using both new and existing technology.

**Peter Grant:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ross Thomson:** No, thank you.

To return to the Brexit prize of being able to set our own trade policy, it was on 9 March 1776 that a great Scot, Adam Smith, published “The Wealth of Nations”, in which he outlined a vision of how trade produced prosperity and opportunity. Post Brexit, we can revitalise that vision. After we leave the EU, we can become a global leader in free trade, using trade to spread prosperity and political stability. I was pleased to welcome the Secretary of State for International Trade to my constituency last week, where he heard about the opportunities for fish processing and for oil and gas in trade across the world to increase exports and promote prosperity not just at home, but abroad.

**Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con):** To cut through all this debate about whether we should stay in the customs union, I seem to remember that our manifesto was quite clear that we were leaving the EU, the single market and the customs union, and that we were going to negotiate a free trade agreement. Surely the whole party and the whole House can unite around that. That is why we are having the implementation Bill and ensuring that all these existing laws are in our law. What could be more simple than a free trade deal? Let us stick to it.

**Ross Thomson:** I could not agree more with my colleague. Not only was that in our manifesto, but I believe it was in those of other parties so that we would enact the wishes of the British people. I am not surprised that the only party not listening to those wishes is the SNP, because it puts its fingers in its ears to the results of all and any referendums.

I am delighted that the new Department for International trade has undertaken 167 visits overseas. It is clear from the trips that Ministers have taken that a British label on goods is regarded as a sign of quality, as it is for services, and the demand for British is huge. International demand for British goods is growing, and Aberdeen, which I represent—

**Stephen Gethins:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ross Thomson:** No, thank you.

Aberdeen is well placed to take advantage of this, given that 90% of manufacturing in the city I represent currently gets exported, mainly in oil and gas, and in environmental engineering.

**Lady Hermon:** I am very grateful indeed to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene. May I ask him to reflect? He says that the introduction of existing and new technology on the Northern Ireland border with

the Republic of Ireland would mean that we would have nothing to worry about, but how will that work, given that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has today said publicly that there will be “no new cameras” on the border? How will the new or existing technology be put in place?

**Ross Thomson:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention, but I believe that I have already answered those points. There does not need to be infrastructure at the border. From GPS to mobile tracking to trusted traders, I think I have answered all those points.

I am running out of time, so I will end by saying that there are huge opportunities for Aberdeen, the north-east and Scotland to use our competitive advantage to seize the benefits of Brexit. We must set our sights on the future—a new and global future.

5.15 pm

**Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab):** I am glad we are having this debate. It is often demanded of this House on international matters and in negotiations that we back the Prime Minister of the day, but 78 years ago this month the Labour party did the unimaginable: in the early stages of the second world war, when we were fighting for national survival—arguably a bigger issue than Brexit—we voted against the then Conservative Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and we drove him from office. At the time, the Labour party was led by one of this country’s greatest ever leaders, Clement Attlee.

Our decision in May 1940 to force a Division in this House on what was dubbed the Norway debate, because it related to the allies’ campaign to stop the German invasion of Norway, led to the resignation of Neville Chamberlain. At the time, we were attacked for being opportunistic, undermining the Prime Minister, and being devious and divisive. We were told by Conservative Members that this was not the right time, at such a dangerous moment, to “snipe” at the Prime Minister. *The Times* called it “a great misfortune” that we did what we did. The criticisms being levelled at us now, for scrutinising what the Government are doing on Brexit, are similar in tone. Looking back, that moment in 1940 is celebrated. It led to a new Government of national unity, led by Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee, which helped to see off the Nazis.

Brexit is clearly a very different situation: it is not a decision about war and peace, life and death, but it is surely the gravest issue to face this Parliament in more than 50 years. Given the importance of the issue we are dealing with, no one who sits in this House—I say this to the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson)—should see it as their job to act simply as a rubber stamp for the Prime Minister of the day, whichever side of the House we sit on. That is why it is absolutely essential that this House is provided with the papers and the evidence on which Ministers are making decisions.

**Lady Hermon:** I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman had the opportunity last night to hear the interview on “Newsnight” with the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, who talked about the New IRA dissidents—a chilling title—who are willing to exploit Brexit. Will he and his colleagues call on the Government to put redacted copies, so that no confidential names are mentioned, of the Chief Constable’s security briefings to Ministers in the House of Commons Library?

**Chuka Umunna:** I absolutely support what the hon. Lady calls for. That is very much the reason why I am an advocate of our continued participation not only in the customs union but in the European economic area. Not only would leaving the customs union and the EEA be a bad decision for our economy, with the customs union relating principally to manufactured goods and the EEA being vital for our services, which account for 80% of our economy, but the Irish Government and many others are absolutely clear that to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland we need to continue to participate in both the customs union and the EEA. We know that because others have told us. We know it economically, because our trade unions and our businesses have argued for it. We therefore deserve to see the evidence on which Ministers have decided to take a different view.

**Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that is not possible to separate the economic issues that relate to manufacturing and to services? Manufacturing needs services and services need manufacturing as part of their work programme, so surely we need to recognise the integrated importance of manufacturing and services to the British economy.

**Chuka Umunna:** That is absolutely right, and of course it is why I support the motion. However, I would also like to see the Government's papers that led them to decide that we should not take up the offer that the EU is making to us of continuing to participate in the EEA, in addition to the papers on the customs partnerships.

I want to deal with some points that the Minister for the Cabinet Office made. First, we have been told that we cannot see any of these papers for a number of reasons, but I say to the Minister that this is a Government without a majority, containing members of the Cabinet who said that we should leave the European Union to reassert parliamentary sovereignty. Withholding evidence like this at every step of the way flies in the face of that argument. Secondly, we are told that asking for all this will undermine the Prime Minister. Every single European diplomat, Foreign Minister and Head of Government we speak to will tell us what is doing more to undermine the Government than anything else: disunity in the Cabinet and people such as the Foreign Secretary coming out and calling their Prime Minister's proposals "crazy". That is what undermines the Government.

I want to make a final observation, because we have talked about the 2016 referendum. This is the way I see it. Yes, the country made a decision to invoke article 50 and start this process, and in some ways, it was like buying a house. We put an offer in to purchase the house. When someone is buying a house, do they immediately go from putting in their offer to paying their deposit, paying the money and completing the purchase? No, they do not—they carry out a survey to check whether the foundations of that house are sound. If the survey comes back and tells them that the foundations are unsound and the house is going to collapse, they do not go ahead and make their purchase.

That is why I believe that 650 people in this House of Commons should not be making a decision of this gravity for 65 million people. They should get a say on the Brexit deal that comes back to us in the autumn, but if Government Members are determined to deny them that, they should at least show them the survey before

they insist on carrying out the purchase. Make no mistake—I say this to Members who are parroting Whips' lines and doing the usual tribal thing—you will not be forgiven. Members of this House will not be forgiven by future generations if they simply dance to the tune of their Whips. We should think very carefully about what we are doing, because we will never be forgiven if we make the wrong decision.

5.22 pm

**Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Today's motion shows definitively that the Opposition are unfit to be a party of Government. It is quite simply the height of irresponsibility for the Labour party to demand that the Government should publish confidential Cabinet papers about our future customs arrangements at a time of such crucial negotiations. That would inevitably expose every detail to our negotiating partners in Europe and destroy every inch of leverage that we have with them. No Government could assent to that, and no Opposition worthy of being a Government should ask for it.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** I do not know whether my hon. Friend heard the historical analogy from the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna), but it was entirely false, because the Labour party then was not trying to get Cabinet papers revealed—that would have been ridiculous, either in wartime or now. What it was trying to do was bring down the Prime Minister. That suggests that this motion and this debate are not about the truth; they are about trying to bring down the Prime Minister.

**Mr Clarke:** I agree, and I would draw another historical analogy: it is 60 years ago this year that Nye Bevan issued his famous warning to the Labour party not to send a British Foreign Secretary into the negotiating chamber naked, and that is precisely what this motion would do. It runs directly contrary to our national interest, and the whole country will see how profoundly misguided it is. There is no way of overstating this: every Member who votes for this motion—every one—will be damaging the principles of Cabinet government in the hope of inflicting partisan advantage. It is unforgivable. Coming a week after north-east Labour MPs called for a second referendum—or, as they now euphemistically call it, a people's vote, as if a referendum were not exactly that—this shows the Opposition in the worst possible light.

**Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Given that documents the Government have produced show a devastating impact of at least 11% on the north-east economy, why does the hon. Gentleman continue to lash himself to the mast of this devastating Tory Brexit, which will harm his constituents and mine?

**Mr Clarke:** This is the same "Project Fear" prognosis that we heard in 2016, which has been comprehensively rubbished and which nearly 70% of the hon. Lady's own constituents rejected—and she continues to lecture me about listening to my constituents and acting in their interests.

The Labour party is unreconciled to Brexit, unwilling to deliver it and unfit to run our country, but the Leader of the Opposition should be thanked for giving us

another opportunity to point out the many reasons why Labour's policy on the customs union and Brexit is so absurd. First, depending on who we ask and on which day, Labour has committed to staying in "a" or "the" customs union, but at the same time says it wants the UK to have a say over future trade deals and arrangements. The whole point is that if we are in the customs union but out of the EU, the UK will have no formal role or veto in trade negotiations, and the EU will have no incentive, let alone legal obligation, to negotiate deals that are in the UK's interests.

Secondly, Labour's U-turn towards stay in "a" or "the" customs union clearly breaks a manifesto commitment on which its Members all stood. That manifesto said:

"Labour will set out our priorities in an International Trade White Paper...on the future of Britain's trade policy".

We now discover that that White Paper would simply read: "Priority No. 1: give trade policy back to Brussels".

Thirdly, the EU's customs tariffs hit the poorest in this country the hardest. The highest EU tariffs are concentrated on food, clothing and footwear, which account for 37% of total tariff revenue, so the poorest British consumers are paying to prop up European industries.

Fourthly, the customs union not only hurts the poorest in our own country; it also suppresses the economic growth of the developing world, because EU trade policy encourages cheap imports of raw materials from developing countries, such as coffee, but heavily taxes imports of processed versions of the same good. This means that poorer countries are stuck in a relationship of dependency, whereby there is no incentive to invest in processing technologies, which could lift them from their status as agrarian economies.

Finally, the House should be reminded that during negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, about which Opposition Members made so much fuss in 2015 and 2016, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) gave an impassioned speech to the House in which he concluded that, in negotiating TTIP, we were

"engaging in a race to the bottom".—[*Official Report*, 15 January 2015; Vol. 590, c. 1108.]

As Leader of the Opposition, he is now proposing a policy that would completely abrogate the UK's ability to veto such arrangements in the future, let alone influence their negotiation.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is utterly two-faced that Labour MPs in this House are asking our Government to publish all their negotiating positions but that their friends in the European Parliament are not asking the European Commission to publish theirs?

**Mr Clarke:** I cannot improve on that point, other than to say that it goes to the heart of the matter, which is that this is not about our national interest; it is about the Labour party's domestic political interest. It is shameful and wrong.

The Labour Party, in supporting a customs union, has gone back on the principles of a lifetime, broken a manifesto pledge and sided with corporations over consumers. It would punish the poorest in this country and abroad and subject the UK, one of the largest

economies in the world, to a Turkey-style relationship of dependency in which the EU has complete control over our trade and customs. It is desperate for any opportunity to bring down the Government and has chosen to put power before principles and party before country. Millions of its own voters will be watching very closely indeed.

5.28 pm

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate on the future of our trade in goods and often the services associated with them—a matter on which I spoke in our recent debate in the House.

The Government have shown that they are not capable of reaching a decision in the national interest. What we are set to receive in the next few weeks will be a fudge between the Prime Minister's warring Cabinet factions. It is time to trust Parliament to address these complex matters and to give it all the information it needs. I therefore support the motion.

We hear from those who criticise the EU that we need to escape its bureaucracy and red tape, but the irony of the Government's two customs proposals is that they would lead to more barriers and more delays than we currently experience with the customs union. Let me set out some key points.

First, there is the customs partnership, which could undermine the tariff systems of both the UK and the EU. It would require us to track the movement of every good imported to the UK for which the UK and EU did not have identical tariffs and quotas. That surveillance could multiply exponentially over time. Sussex University's UK Trade Policy Observatory has said that it is very hard to see how it could work, and even the Government's own HMRC is reported to believe that the proposal is unviable. Secondly, there is the "max fac" option. To put it simply, that would eventually require some infrastructure on the Irish border, which the Government themselves ruled out in the joint report in December and which the EU would be unwilling to revisit.

Perhaps the worst aspect of this, however, is that even if both the Government's proposals worked perfectly, neither could be in place by the time we needed them. After the Government had finally made a decision, it would reportedly take up to three to five years for the systems to be up and running. That is likely to take us between one and three years past the end of our transition period. So the choice is very simple, but it is a choice that the Prime Minister is refusing to make. Either we stay in the customs union, or we impose unnecessary barriers and costs on British businesses and infrastructure at the Irish border.

**Dr Whitford:** It is not just a question of infrastructure at the Irish border as if there were just one checkpoint. There are more than 270 crossings. During the troubles many of them were blocked by boulders, and people had to make detours of 20 or 30 miles. We cannot send the people who live near the border in Northern Ireland back to that situation.

**Seema Malhotra:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Indeed, I believe that there are more crossings on that border than in all the other EU countries put together. That, I think, is a reality check on what is actually possible.

[Seema Malhotra]

The practicalities of what those barriers and costs will mean can be assessed through two real-world examples, aerospace and medicines. The UK's aerospace industry is a global success story that attracts significant investment. In my constituency, for instance, there is Boeing's parts distribution centre in Feltham, the largest such centre in Europe. It relies on complex and globally integrated supply chains. Hundreds of aerospace parts currently flow back and forth daily across the EU's borders to and from the UK, before being integrated into new aircraft or used to support in-service fleets. The just-in-time demands of the aerospace industry require quick and predictable border processes so that parts can reach their destination and repairs can be done in hours. Maintaining that speed for aerospace goods post Brexit is vital.

As for medicines, the Proprietary Association of Great Britain, the industry body for consumer medicines that we all know and use such as Beechams and Calpol, has said that a customs union is crucial to "minimise the additional time and administrative burden" at the border. Ingredients for products that we use daily can cross the UK border up to four times during the manufacturing process.

We know that this debate is taking place in the absence of any credible evidence to suggest that leaving the customs union would be of net benefit to the UK. It is time to recognise that it is not an academic debate that will have no consequences, but a serious debate whose consequences could cost us billions and have an impact on jobs and prosperity for decades to come.

5.34 pm

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): My constituents would be aghast at the behaviour of the Labour party. I represent parts of the Wigan and Bolton boroughs, and those who live there would hardly believe that Labour Members are yet again trying to undermine the British people and give every advantage to the Brussels bureaucrats. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to reject subversive Labour and deliver an honest Brexit.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing)**: My goodness! That has never happened before.

5.35 pm

**Emma Reynolds** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Maybe I can take the extra time.

While I welcome the motion, I regret that the Government have used today's debate to focus on process rather than substance, because there are some crucial issues around the customs union and at the heart of today's debate. It is laughable that Conservative Members should be lecturing the Labour party about acting irresponsibly and against the national interest when their party consistently puts party interests above the national interest, when their party's Foreign Secretary has called the Prime Minister's own proposals for a customs partnership "crazy", and when their party likes to debate these issues in national newspapers rather than this Chamber.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): But this motion is the ultimate procedural motion. Why have the Opposition not done their job and tabled a motion about the

customs union or custom arrangement instead of this—I have to say it—Mickey Mouse motion that does not deserve any support?

**Emma Reynolds**: I sometimes agree with the right hon. Lady but on this occasion I do not. The paper I am holding up now is the kind of ludicrous document we have before us: the "Future customs arrangements" paper. It is the only thing written by this Government on the customs union, and it contains just five flimsy paragraphs on the Prime Minister's supposedly preferred option. That is not acceptable. Members of this House have a right to scrutinise the Government's proposals, and this document is for the moment all we have to go on.

At the crux of this debate is the fact that membership of the customs union is crucial for two reasons. It is crucial because it is the only way to protect jobs and investment in my region of the west midlands and across the country. The EU is the UK's biggest export market and our manufacturers, such as those in the automotive sector like Jaguar Land Rover and in the aerospace sector, rely on a frictionless border with that market. Any delays on the border, any extra cost and any added bureaucracy will put jobs and investment at risk.

**Sir Edward Leigh**: Has the hon. Lady no higher ambition than to be like Turkey?

**Emma Reynolds**: Turkey's arrangement with the EU was agreed when Turkey was on the path to membership; that is not the arrangement the Labour party is seeking with the EU, and to suggest otherwise is, frankly, ludicrous. We are proposing that we remain in the customs union and have a say over trade agreements done with the rest of the world. That is a more responsible policy than the hard Brexit that Conservative Members are preaching.

The other crucial issue in this debate is the border on the island of Ireland. The Prime Minister has made two contradictory promises: she has promised that there will continue to be an invisible border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, but she has also promised that we will leave the customs union. Anybody who has rationally considered this in the round will come to the same conclusion as I have: it is clearly not possible to do both of those things. That is why both the models being considered by the Government have been rejected by the EU. The Prime Minister can have as many meetings of the Cabinet and the Cabinet Sub-Committee and with Tory Back Benchers as she likes, but that does not change the fact that the EU opposes both of these models and neither of them is tried and tested. If she spent a little less time negotiating with her party and a little more time negotiating with our EU partners, she might have made more progress in the negotiations to date.

**Peter Grant**: Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Emma Reynolds**: I will not.

Let us briefly consider the two models. Even some Conservative Members seem to be suggesting that the Prime Minister's preferred option of the customs partnership is illegal, "crazy" and "cretinous", so she does not even seem to have the backing of her own Members of Parliament. The EU has called it "magical thinking", and from looking at the detail of the proposal

it would appear that we would have to track every import into the UK—the EU tariffs would be different from those with the rest of the world—and collect the relevant tariffs, trusting those who say that the final destination is the EU. If it was not for the EU but stayed in the UK, we would not need to track it. That does not sound like a workable proposal to me. It would be a bureaucratic nightmare.

Then we come to the “max fac” option. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson)—it would be nice if he were listening—spoke enthusiastically about Dr Lars Karlsson’s proposals. When the Exiting the European Union Committee took evidence from Dr Karlsson, he admitted that some form of infrastructure—whether CCTV or automatic number plate recognition—would be required on the border. It has already been said that that would go against what has been agreed if we are to retain an invisible border on the island of Ireland.

My last point is that geography matters in trade, and I will leave the House with this point:

“We export more to Ireland than we do to China, almost twice as much to Belgium as we do to India, and nearly three times as much to Sweden as we do to Brazil. It is not realistic to think we could just replace European trade with these new markets.”

Those were the words of the then Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, in April 2016.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. A great many people still wish to speak, and we have limited time, so after the next speaker I will reduce the time limit to three minutes. I call Andrew Bowie.

5.41 pm

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am in your debt.

This is the second time in as many weeks that we in this House have debated as part of an Opposition day debate the customs arrangements after the UK has left the European Union. That is only right and proper, as this is one of the major decisions facing the country today. The arguments for all the options have been rehearsed at length in this place, and it is only right that the Government should take seriously the concerns of all individuals who, whether I agree with them or not, have the interests of this country and its people at heart. I personally have complete faith that the Government will come to the right decision at the right time for this country. That is something that the Opposition do not seem to understand.

Of course there are differing opinions on this side of the House as to what would be the best way forward. Unlike the parties opposite, we enjoy debate and opinion in our party. We have not yet succumbed to the group-think mentality that seems to have subsumed most of the Opposition. Although I politely disagree with some of my hon. and, indeed, learned Friends on the best choice for Britain regarding our customs arrangements with the EU, I know that they are being constructive in their suggestions, positive in their outlook and united behind the ideal of building a better future for this country, none of which can be achieved by the suggestion in the motion we are debating today. To what end would releasing all of those papers take us? What would it achieve?

Would it take us closer to a resolution of this vital issue? Sadly, I think not. This is not a helpful motion. It is a disruptive and petty motion aimed at creating a distraction from the divisions and flip-flopping of the Opposition on this and practically every other issue, and it shows naivety at the top of the Labour party.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks about the debate that takes place within his own party, but surely that is done on the basis of information and knowledge rather than ignorance. Would not the disclosure of these documents provide the information and knowledge that we all need if we are to debate what is in front of us?

**Andrew Bowie:** I am terribly sorry; I do respect the hon. Gentleman, but I heartily disagree with him on this point. Releasing these documents would set a very dangerous precedent for how Cabinet Government and indeed the government of this country would proceed in the future.

I was heartened by the response of the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) in neglecting to answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) about Scottish Government papers. He clearly agrees with us on the importance of confidentiality when it comes to Government papers. However, when my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) raised the image of Scottish Cabinet meetings, I could not shake the memory of Margaret Thatcher and her vegetables on “Spitting Image” a few years ago.

I simply do not understand the negativity shown by Opposition Members regarding our country’s future. They are constantly looking at the glass as though it were half empty. They are negative and downcast. They are too busy looking back in anger, rather than looking forward with optimism. I am convinced that this Government will succeed in the negotiations. They will succeed in building a country that is fit for the future, a country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous and open country humming with commerce and creativity and trading with countries all across the world. Unlike the party opposite, I actually want our Government to succeed in the negotiations. If we voted for the motion here today, we would be undermining their ability to do that. That is why I support the Government, and that is why I will be voting against the motion this evening.

5.44 pm

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister for Cabinet Office gave all sorts of procedural reasons for why these papers should not be released. He spoke a lot about the relationship between Parliament and the Executive, but he did not mention the people who matter in all this: the British public, our businesses and the trade unions that represent workers who will lose jobs if we crash out of the EU with the reckless hard Brexit that the Government are currently pursuing.

It is no wonder that the Government do not want to release such papers and information because, after weeks of trying to prevent papers from being released, we saw Treasury documents that made it clear that, under all the options being pursued by the Government, we will see job losses, a loss of revenue, a lowering of growth

[Stephen Doughty]

and an increase in public sector borrowing—all the kinds of things that will have an impact on communities up and down the country. Indeed, documents about nuclear safeguards were released today, and the Government marked each one as red. This information should be in the public domain for the public and our businesses to see.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point. Does he accept that we are already seeing the loss of many hundreds of jobs, particularly in our manufacturing sector and particularly in the west midlands, by virtue of these policies and the uncertainty surrounding them?

**Stephen Doughty:** My hon. Friend makes a crucial point. I have the same worries about businesses in Wales, in south Wales and in my constituency.

This is our biggest decision since the second world war, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) pointed out, we have a total shambles from the Government. Rows are largely being conducted in public, but without the public knowing what the Government know about the real impacts on businesses and on Northern Ireland and the huge inconsistencies in what is being put forward, let alone the risks to our place in the world.

We have heard about the risks of leaving the customs union. We have heard about the £466 billion-worth of current goods trade with the EU. The Brexit Secretary's special adviser said that there would be a cost of £25 billion a year up until 2030. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has pointed out the issues with customs checks on imported goods. The Home Affairs Committee revealed the lack of preparation at the Home Office, including the lack of recruitment of people to carry out customs checks, and the cost of all that. We have not even left yet, but the Home Office has already had to request up to half a billion pounds that could have been spent on policing. Instead, it is going on preparing for a hard Brexit. We have also heard about the impact on the Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland border, including some excellent points, as ever, from the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), but the Northern Ireland Secretary has not even been to Brussels to discuss the issues and the Brexit Secretary went over to Northern Ireland only relatively recently.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) pointed out the risk to jobs, and we repeatedly hear that directly from businesses. Many businesses have come to see me in private to tell me how disastrous the Government's approach is. The truth is that the Government know that, but they are just not willing to admit it in public. Many businesses are activating major Brexit contingency plans. We have heard about the automotive sector, but the National Farmers Union has also described the scenario as disastrous. The pharmaceutical industry has warned about the impacts, and the Chemical Industries Association has made it clear that the best thing for us is to retain our membership of the single market and the customs union.

I have spoken extensively with the UK Chamber of Shipping about the impact on Welsh ports, including in my constituency, and it warns that the UK is facing an absolutely catastrophe. The same goes for steel,

manufacturing, high-tech industries and, of course, the creative industries. We should not forget about the ability of our musicians and creative people to travel across Europe, making incredible products and selling them to the world.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) said, we cannot fundamentally divorce all that from the arguments about the single market. I favour our staying in the EEA and in the customs union, and the Social Democratic and Labour party—Labour's partner in Northern Ireland—has said the same. At the moment, however, the Government are riven in two in public and in private. They are unprepared, irresponsible and incompetent, and, what is worse, they know it.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Paul Masterton—[*Interruption.*] Where is the fella? I call Vicky Ford.

5.49 pm

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Our negotiations with Europe are the most complex for a generation. I support transparency, scrutiny and democratic decision making, but it is utterly ludicrous to expect one side at the negotiating table to have a higher level of disclosure on its negotiating position than is expected of those on the other side—the EU. That is why I will not be supporting the motion tonight. It ties our hands.

It is utterly normal in international negotiations for parties to consider more than one option. When the EU wanted to reform the common agricultural policy, there were four options; when it published its recent paper on the future of Europe, there were five options.

We should not somehow blame the Government for being slow in deciding their future option. The Government laid out their options last August, and I was in Ireland discussing it with businesses on both sides of the border within a fortnight, but it was only last Sunday that the Irish Foreign Minister suggested he is open to having more exploratory talks.

I do not blame the Irish for taking time. I grew up on the border in Northern Ireland. I was born and raised in Omagh, where 29 people lost their lives after the Good Friday agreement. I will not jeopardise the Good Friday agreement; I will not jeopardise peace in Northern Ireland; and I will not jeopardise the Union that holds our country united.

We have to find a solution that works. Neither of the two solutions is perfect.

**Owen Smith** (Pontypridd) (Lab): I take at face value the hon. Lady's comments about her support for the Good Friday agreement, but what is her response to the people in Northern Ireland, including the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, who disagree with her, who feel that Brexit risks a hard border and who feel that that would damage peace?

**Vicky Ford:** We have to find a solution that meets the Prime Minister's criterion of no hard border in Northern Ireland, which is why I want to continue the discussions on the partnership agreement. The partnership agreement is not perfect, and it has never been done before, but we should let the Government continue negotiating and not close down options.

The “max fac” solution is not perfect, either. Some 145,000 businesses that trade with Europe would have to start doing customs declarations for the first time, and it relies on the small business exemption on the border in Ireland, which puts our relationship with Ireland into permanent potential conflict because Ireland would end up having to be the policeman of our door with Europe.

We need to continue looking, but we also need to remember that resolving customs is only part of this discussion. It does not even solve the goods issue. We still need to deal with rules of origin. Incidentally, will the Minister please make sure we look at pan-Euro-Mediterranean cumulation of origin as a sensible option?

**Andrew Bowie:** Does my hon. Friend agree it is the height of hypocrisy for Labour Members of Parliament to come to the House demanding that the Government disclose confidential papers on our negotiations when Labour MEPs refuse to demand the same of the European Commission in Brussels?

**Vicky Ford:** I completely agree, and that brings me on to my next point because, actually, there has been a huge amount of disclosure on the direction of the negotiations. When I say that customs union is not a full deal, it is because many other areas, such as services, digital and medicines regulation, have to be addressed both for us and for people on the other side of our borders. That was in the Mansion House speech, but, more importantly, it was laid down just last week in a joint document published by the UK and the EU on the discussion topics for the future partnership.

Businesses need clarity—I understand that—and they will probably need a lot more time to implement whatever decisions are reached. I am sure many businesses will need more time for implementation than we previously thought, but let us take the time to get this right and let us let the Government get on with their negotiations and with focusing on finding the end solution.

5.54 pm

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): I want to speak in support of the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who led for Labour from the Front Bench and made an excellent contribution. I specifically want to support his comment that there is a majority in this House for a sensible approach. We would not imagine anything less than good, British common sense in the House of Commons, but I cannot understand why the Prime Minister, having called a general election to determine her Brexit, would not listen to the views of those democratically elected to this place. Instead, the Government’s approach is chaotic. The Minister said our motion would affect the quality of policy making—that is a joke, given what we currently face. The lack of British diplomacy at this crucial point for our country is embarrassing, and the Secretary of State’s whole argument makes absolutely no sense given the Foreign Secretary’s conduct.

This motion is designed to reset that balance and make sure the British people can hold the Government properly to account, because Labour’s approach to Brexit is sensible. It reflects how trade currently is, and I commend the speech made by the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), as her description was of

how trade actually is today; we produce goods across borders, not within them. We need an approach to customs that provides for the just-in-time logistics that our modern economy has embedded within it.

**Stephen Doughty:** My hon. Friend mentioned the speech by the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), so does she agree that there are likely to be many other Conservative Members saying exactly the same things in private to the Prime Minister, but that unfortunately she is being held hostage by a group of extremists who shout very loudly?

**Alison McGovern:** The maths in this is pretty clear, and if I were the Prime Minister, I would listen to the majority of people in this House and not to a vocal minority.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) made an excellent contribution, describing all the ways in which our manufacturing business needs a sensible customs arrangement that means we can transfer goods across borders quickly. I simply add that for manufacturing towns up and down Britain that is mission critical. We simply can no longer afford to have places that are left behind, where a factory shuts and is never replaced. Those were the dark days of the 1980s, and we must not have that again, not now.

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point about multinational supply chains and how it is important not to have delays, paperwork or checks in the middle of that operation. Does she agree that this is about not just customs, but common standards and rules? Anyone in this House, on any side, who thinks that this is just about customs and not about the adherence to common standards and rules is kidding themselves.

**Alison McGovern:** Perhaps it is because I have learnt a great deal from my right hon. Friend that he pre-empted the next paragraph of my contribution. Labour’s approach has been absolutely sensible to date, but we need one small addition to our policy, which is to support membership of the single market. As he said, other things are needed. We need common standards and, specifically, an agreement on rules of origin, which are necessary to make sure that manufacturing business in this country does not have to expend time, money and energy on constantly calculating volume and what percentage within that will agree with the EU on the EU’s rules of origin requirements. That simply cannot happen, which is why we need membership of the single market.

Finally, this country simply has an ageing population, and although that is a great thing, our country will not financially succeed without a sensible immigration policy. So I simply say to those in this House, and wherever else, who think that the answer to all our woes is to end the approach we have had on immigration to date that we cannot cope with our dependency ratio being as it is. We need a sensible approach to immigration going forward and that should be part of our future relationship with the EU. It is not dramatic or complicated; we just need to take, as the Labour Front Benchers have today, a pragmatic, common-sense approach and listen to the British people.

5.59 pm

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). However, people outside the Chamber watching the debate could be forgiven for wondering what month and what year we are in. Being in here, listening to the arguments that we heard during the referendum campaign, is like groundhog day.

The hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) questioned our voters' ability to make up their minds about the referendum, but I will take no lectures from him. I say to him and to all hon. Members that people in Redditch—my constituents—knew exactly what they were voting for in the referendum and, on that day, 62% of them voted to leave the European Union. It is therefore my job to come here and deliver a sensible Brexit—yes, I use the words “sensible Brexit”—that protects their livelihoods.

We hear the argument rehearsed time and again that a catastrophe—an economic disaster—is about to hit us all. Yet week after week, our economy confounds that. Since we voted to leave the European Union, British businesses and British entrepreneurs are doing what they have always done and what they do best: creating jobs, innovating, and starting new businesses that provide jobs for my constituents and others throughout the country. We have record high employment in this country. Growing foreign direct investment is coming into our country, creating jobs and benefiting all our constituents.

It is astonishing to hear accusations that members of our Cabinet do not have the same opinions. Is it any surprise? There are highly respected Conservative Members who have made their views on the EU clear for decades. Our party does not take the approach that those who enter the Cabinet become clones. Discussions go on in Cabinet—that is a healthy way of finding the best method to address the biggest challenge facing our country. I will not vote for the motion and I support the Government's approach.

6.2 pm

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): Let us make no mistake: the only way to ensure tariff-free and frictionless trade, as well protecting against a hard border on the island of Ireland, is to remain in the customs union.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union told me in a recent debate that the Canada-United States border was an example of a customs arrangement that the Government may seek to replicate. However, the Irish Prime Minister, having visited that border, said:

“I saw a hard border with physical infrastructure, with customs posts, people in uniforms with arms and dogs.”

That is not what we want for the border in Ireland.

**Matt Western:** Having visited Detroit and that border between the US and Canada in February, I can confirm that it takes an average of eight minutes to get through, and that it is what a hard border looks like, with X-ray machines and so on. There would be serious friction on such a border.

**Mrs Moon:** It is good to hear such first-hand experience in the House. Clearly such an option is unacceptable for peace in Ireland and the efficient customs regime that we seek. Donald Tusk has effectively said that if Ireland

does not find the UK's offer on the border acceptable, the EU will not allow negotiations to move on to trade. If we also consider the fact that the Irish Prime Minister has said that the US-Canada border example “is definitely not a solution”,

it is clear that the only way forward is to remain in the customs union.

My constituency of Bridgend has the largest Ford engine factory in Europe. The automotive sector is critical to the wellbeing of many families throughout my constituency—on average, around 12,000 families are linked to work with that factory. According to the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, the introduction of tariffs on trade with the EU because of our leaving the customs union would significantly increase costs. A 10% tariff on finished vehicles would cost the industry £4.5 billion, increasing the price of cars imported to the UK from the EU by an average of around £1,500. Tariff costs and custom burdens on such a highly integrated supply chain would undoubtedly disrupt and undermine the competitiveness of UK manufacturing, and that is without the common standards and rules mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden).

The Government have said that one of their strategic objectives is

“ensuring UK-EU trade is as frictionless as possible”.

Automotive experts have made it crystal clear that customs barriers and tariffs would be crippling for their industry. As frictionless as possible is just not good enough. It is no secret that the single market and customs union have been vital for the competitiveness of the sector. In the UK, it has made more than £71 billion in turnover and supports more than 800,000 jobs. That is not something that we can toss away lightly.

To protect jobs and to protect the automotive industry, the Government should be actively seeking to avoid any customs tariffs whatsoever. The only way to do that is in the customs union. My constituents deserve to know what future the Government are taking them towards. They have the right to make the ultimate decision, based on the facts—facts that were denied to them at the time of the referendum. Let them have those facts now, and let us know what the Government know about the risks we are taking as a result of their line of taking us out of the customs union.

6.7 pm

**Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is with some regret that I speak in this debate, given the way in which Opposition Front Benchers have yet again chosen to abuse a parliamentary procedure to make a political point. I agree completely with my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who described this as a Mickey Mouse motion. It is such a waste of an Opposition day debate.

The customs arrangements after the UK leaves the EU will have both political and economic impacts. There have been discussions regarding many models—some that will make our borders invisible and others that will revolutionise the world. I appreciate this wave of technological enthusiasm, but it is important to remember that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee reported:

“We have...had no visibility of any technical solutions, anywhere in the world, beyond the aspirational, that would remove the need for physical infrastructure at the border.”

The Prime Minister has set out three key objectives for the future deep customs arrangement promised in the Conservative party manifesto. Those are the right options, and she should be given the space and flexibility to come up with the solution that works in the best interests of our nation. If she is not able to do so—if she is boxed in and undermined—the consequences will be particularly serious, especially for the island of Ireland.

One popular trope is that we should just walk away and unilaterally impose zero tariffs, and then there would be no need for a hard border—that we just decide to have nothing and that is it. But we are leaving the EU in 10 months and we need to get real. Having zero tariffs with a country does not automatically eliminate the need for border checks, and such a proposal would run into issues under article 39 of the WTO rules. In a no-deal situation, both the WTO rules, to which we would be subject, and the EU rules, to which the Irish Republic would be subject, would require the implementation of a de facto border.

Of course, tariffs are only part of the problem, and arguably they are a very minor one. Non-tariff barriers are far more important, and they are created by inadequately harmonised regulation. Rules of origin could render any tariff-free deal that we strike meaningless for many companies. Product quality-checking issues are far more critical, as they speak to issues such as public health, public safety and animal welfare.

Other examples of borders, such as those in Norway, Switzerland or even Canada, are completely useless for the UK situation. The Swiss border has a level of physical infrastructure for commercial freight that both sides in the negotiations have said that they do not want. Switzerland accepts the vast majority of the EU *acquis* on goods and it is also in Schengen which, last time I checked, is nobody's policy position.

It is not possible to know precisely what customs arrangements will be necessary until after the future trading relationship has been determined, so we must let the Prime Minister get on with it. The Opposition are very able when it comes to talking about process—in fact they are obsessed with it to the exclusion of outcomes—but they will soon find out that what our constituents want and need are solutions to the real issues that we face, not just politicking and endless arguments about procedure.

6.10 pm

**Dr Rosena Allin-Khan** (Tooting) (Lab): There is stalemate within the Cabinet. In the blue corner, we have the Prime Minister leading the charge for a substandard customs partnership; in the purple corner, we have arch-Brexiters pushing for an economy-wrecking maximum facilitation scheme. Neither is workable, and they have both been rejected by the EU, so why are we even discussing them?

We are told that a high-tech computerised system can be used to process people at the border without the need for checks. Do we need reminding that, less than two years ago, this House found Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to be improperly targeting ordinary hard-working people through an outsourced company? Do we need reminding that, just a couple of weeks ago, the Home Secretary resigned because of serious Home Office failings? How can we even begin to entertain the idea that a hi-tech computerised system will give us frictionless trade?

Every lorry crossing the border into Switzerland is stopped while drivers' paperwork is checked. Upwards of 15,000 lorries a day pass through Dover. None of the proposals put forward by the Government would result in frictionless trade; it would be a "frictionful" trading nightmare, and if it is going to be a trading nightmare, why are we even considering it?

For me, there is only one option: a customs union between the UK and the EU. That is the best way to ensure that there are no tariffs or customs checks within Europe. When I talk to businesses, they tell me that they want tariff-free trading with Europe, and they want it without a mountain of paperwork. When I talk to our trade unions, they say that they want workers' rights protected. They want a deal that raises living standards, not threatens them. If the Government get their way, the burden will be placed on our businesses and our workforce—ordinary hard-working people. Not being part of a customs union will cost far more than any other proposed trade deal, and if it is going to cost us more, why are we even considering it?

We are being told day in, day out, that leaving the European Union will make us worse off, that business will be hampered, that jobs will be harmed and that our rights will be watered down. I fear for this country when the Brexit Secretary presents us with the final deal. I stood up for my constituency of Tooting when I voted against triggering article 50, and I will not hesitate to do the same when it comes to the final deal. I will not vote for a deal that makes Tooting and our country worse off.

6.13 pm

**Lee Rowley** (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Well, well, well, it is Wednesday, it is an Opposition day, and we are doing the Humble Address again. That rarely used instrument of parliamentary procedure, which has not been seen much over the past 200 years, has suddenly been used half a dozen times in less than six months. I accept that, effectively, there are two groups within the main Opposition party. Those in the more sensible group—they usually sit towards the back of the Chamber—feel very heartfelt about leaving the European Union and disagree with the principle of doing so. They make it quite clear, through this kind of proposal, that they do not wish that to happen. I respectfully disagree with them and gently ask individuals such as the hon. Members for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) and for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty)—neither of them are in their place, although they were here for much of this debate—to reflect on some of the words that they use. There is a genuine view on the Government Benches—and in constituencies such as mine, which voted 63% to leave—that we should leave the European Union, the single market and the customs union, and that there are options and opportunities when we do. To suggest that we are extremists or that we are being overly partisan because of that does nothing for my constituents or for the reputation of this House and how we are debating this issue. Therefore, although I understand hon. Members' concerns, I ask them to consider their language separately.

My respect, however, does not extend to the Opposition Front Benchers, who are being deeply disingenuous in pursuing this proposal and the suggestions in it. It was heartening to hear my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), accept that the Labour party's proposals would mean that it would

[Lee Rowley]

have no control over customs or future trading arrangements—one of the key reasons why 63% of my constituents voted to leave in the referendum two years ago. If that is the case, that is fine, but we should not draw an artificial distinction between having a trade deal and not having trade. The North American Free Trade Agreement quadrupled the amount of trade in that region when it was introduced in the 1990s. We can go out and seek to strike independent free trade deals that will be positive and beneficial to our country.

It is deeply disingenuous of the Opposition to suggest, three quarters of the way through negotiations—three quarters of the way through the Government trying to understand how we are going to strike a new set of deals with the European Union—that we should just throw open the books and show the European Union exactly what we are doing and thinking. The Opposition's motion misunderstands trading policy, misrepresents the negotiations—probably wilfully—and misjudges the public mood. I will happily vote against it.

6.16 pm

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): With so much mistrust towards politicians, it is important that we all support transparency wherever possible. It prevents abuses of power and is vital for a healthy parliamentary democracy—a clear reason why so many people voted to leave. It is therefore very strange that the Government, who support leaving, are now acting in such a non-transparent way. Why are they against transparency? What do they have to hide? Here is the reason: since 2016 the Government have still not moved on from their position of having their cake and eating it.

The Cabinet are having an internal row about whether to support a technological solution or the idea of a customs partnership. The European Union has already rejected both proposals as being in la-la land. In the case of the technological solution, nowhere in the world is there a customs border without physical border checks. The only exception is the border between Alaska and Canada, separated by thousands of miles of ice. If the technology existed, why would countries such as Norway and Sweden, or the US and Canada, not use it?

A customs partnership would still be de facto a hard border and would not solve the issue of the Irish border. That is contrary to what the Prime Minister promised in the joint statement in December 2017.

**Stephen Kerr:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Wera Hobhouse:** No, I have very little time.

The robust enforcement mechanism that the Government talk about would still mean that there would be physical border infrastructure. The frequency of checks does not take away the principle of a hard border. If the EU believes that the proposals are delusional but the Government believe that they are coherent, how do we establish who is right? That is why we need to see the written documentation from Government officials.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Wera Hobhouse:** No, I have no time.

We want to know what advice Ministers were given. That is why we support the Humble Address motion. I suspect that the Government want to keep Parliament and the people in the dark so that they can leave the European Union at any price. It is time that the Government were honest about the realities of Brexit and let the people take back control of the process.

The meaningful vote is due to come to Parliament in the autumn; 650 MPs have an important role to play, but 650 MPs cannot update, confirm or review the decision taken by 33 million people in June 2016. If we live in a proper democracy, the people must have the final say. The people must finish what the people have started. I look forward to my constituents in Bath having the final say on the deal.

6.19 pm

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): If the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) had indulged me by allowing an intervention, I would have asked her how many such bundles of papers the Liberal Democrats offered to the House while they were in government: precious few, I would suggest.

This is a silly motion. It is a complete waste of the House's time. It is political posturing at its very worst. It is further evidence of Labour Members' obsession with process and procedure and their complete lack of interest in the national interest. We should be focusing attention on outcomes rather than processes. I appeal to Labour Members by reading to them the words of someone who is venerated by many of them, including many of their most outspoken remainers:

"If you are trying to take a difficult decision and you're weighing up the pros and cons, you have frank conversations... And if those conversations then are put out in a published form that afterwards are liable to be highlighted in particular ways, you are going to be very cautious. That's why it's not a sensible thing."

That was said by Tony Blair. I ask Labour Members to consider this: if that was the approach to sensible government of the only leader they have had who has led them to general election victories, then why on earth should it not be the approach of those who pretend, at least, to have aspirations to be the Government of this country? That is something I very much hope we will never see.

I want to make one thing clear. There is one element of our post Brexit customs policy that absolutely must be defended, and that is the principle that we leave the European Union as one United Kingdom. Whichever option the Government pursue, and whichever agreement we negotiate with the EU, it is vital that we maintain our commitment to the Union and have no borders within the United Kingdom. A border in the Irish sea, or at Gretna or Berwick, would be totally unacceptable. We cannot have any part of the United Kingdom kept, in effect, as part of the EU for customs purposes while the rest of the UK leaves. I am glad that the Government have repeatedly acknowledged that fact. We must leave the EU as one country not just because it preserves the Union but because it is the best option for jobs, businesses and trade across the UK.

I conclude with these words from Liz Cameron, the chief executive of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce. In fact, I see that I do not have time to utter those words, but I am sure that Members can find them by googling them.

6.22 pm

**Jack Dromey** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Erdington is rich in talent but is one of the poorest constituencies in the country. It is blessed, however, by having the Jaguar plant in it. I remember the funereal atmosphere in 2010 when it faced closure, but the factory was turned around, which has transformed the lives of thousands of workers locally, with the workforce doubling in size from 1,400 to nearly 3,000. The foundations were laid in 2008 by a Labour Government with the Automotive Council, and we worked with a coalition Government to build on that, with the new engine plant, the skills initiative in the supply chain and the investment in research and development transforming the UK's automotive sector into the most productive in Europe.

Highly efficient just-in-time manufacturing is essential to maintaining the sector's international competitiveness, because it relies on the free and frictionless movement of goods. For example, seatbelts, which are now highly technical computer-controlled devices, are made by Bosch in Germany; plastic sealing is made in the Czech Republic; wheels are made in Germany; and brake hoses are made in Spain. The modern British car relies on an interconnected web of European automotive suppliers.

Let us look at the statistics. Eleven hundred trucks a day arrive from the European Union, delivering components worth £35 million. Some 80% of auto imports come from the European Union, while 69% of auto exports are sent to the European Union. Our destiny is inextricably linked with that of the European Union. That is why we so strongly favour continuing customs union membership, for all the reasons we have heard, not least those set out brilliantly by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). It seems that many on the Conservative Benches are absolutely oblivious to the consequences of their actions. They are wide-eyed Brexiteers refusing to hear from the industry and the workers in it, and ploughing ahead with that which would be deeply damaging and harm the British national interest.

We are determined to continue to build on the great success story of Jaguar Land Rover, but there are mounting problems, with 1,000 jobs just gone at Solihull and workers being transferred there from the Jag. Impacts are being felt ever more strongly not just from Brexit but from the problems arising out of the transition from diesel. I say in all honesty to the wide-eyed Brexiteers: listen to the industry and to the workers, and do not be taken forward by a hopelessly divided Cabinet that is taking Britain over the cliff edge to what would be a national disaster.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** I think we must hear from Mr Henry Smith.

6.25 pm

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): I am very grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for affording me a few moments to contribute to the debate.

We have just heard from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) that Brexiteers are somehow wide-eyed. I am blessed in Crawley, because my constituents are very sensible in their approach. Some 58% of them voted in June 2016 to leave the European Union, with the clear message that we would

be leaving the customs union and the single market as well. My constituents are wide-eyed with the possibilities of global Britain and no longer being tied to the EU's single market and customs union.

This country has a fantastic global heritage and more unique international links than any other country in the world. We are perfectly placed to be a bridge between the rest of the world and Europe, given our proximity and using the relations that we have. I think that is why a majority of the people of Crawley voted to leave the European Union. They are not insular in the way they view the world. They are employed by international companies located in my constituency—from Gatwick airport to medical technology companies, financial services companies and many others—and they see the global possibilities of free trade. We cannot realise those global free trade opportunities if we remain locked inside the customs union. We can only negotiate international deals with the Commonwealth and with many countries around the world, including the United States, if we are outside the customs union and if we achieve a comprehensive trade agreement with the European Union.

We are talking about negotiations, and I know of no business that would reveal its negotiating hand when seeking to make an agreement; I certainly did not when I ran a business. I know of no other country that would reveal its negotiating strategy in international forums. So that the official Opposition can relate to this, I add that I know of no trade union that would reveal its negotiating hand ahead of seeking a deal on behalf of its members. This motion is a nonsense, and we should vote it down this evening.

6.28 pm

**Jo Platt** (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I am in favour of the Opposition's motion for a number of reasons. First, seeing the documents would allow us to assess the economic impact that the two options will have. As MPs, we have been promised a vote on the final deal between the EU and the UK, but how can we vote on that deal without the information to inform us of the economic impact it will have? Neither can we wait until we are presented with the final deal to have our say on our trading relationship. The Government have openly stated that they wish to hold the House to ransom in October—it is their deal or no deal. As MPs, we need to have an input into this important debate before any deal is reached.

The second reason I am in favour of the motion is to highlight the importance of Labour's policy of forming a new customs union with the EU. A new customs union is the only way to secure the frictionless trade with the EU that our economy relies on. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) rightly pointed out about the car industry, the manufacture of a car involves goods crossing EU borders perhaps a dozen times. If we adopt a policy that adds significant delays and checks at the UK border, what will car manufacturers do—will they carry on as usual, accepting that the UK is less competitive and more expensive, or will we see the gradual relocation of jobs and businesses to the continent? I genuinely fear that the latter may be true.

Under current regulations, if we were to leave the EU without a customs union, 44% of the components of a car need to originate in the UK for us to benefit from

[Jo Platt]

free trade, but a car is currently about 25% British-sourced. This means that the car industry, but also many others, will see tariffs on goods. The ambitious free trade deal that the Government want will be meaningless without a customs union. That is why we need to be up front and honest about the impact each trading option will have.

The only word that comes close to describing this Government's handling of Brexit is "shambolic". We have even heard reports today that the Government are considering scrapping the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill owing to the risks of defeat in this House, and I hope the Minister will clarify those reports and confirm that the Bill will return to the Commons after it has passed through the Lords. As an Opposition, we must do all we can to shine a light on the dangers of a Tory Brexit, and, as we leave the EU, we must do everything we can to protect businesses, jobs and our economy. That is Labour's guiding Brexit principle, and I urge colleagues to vote in favour of the motion.

6.31 pm

**James Frith** (Bury North) (Lab): Releasing this information is part of the job: this is about scrutiny, not mutiny.

As I have said in the House and in my constituency, I want a Brexit that is the best for Bury and Britain, not the confines and machinations of hard-liners among Government Members sitting on their protected bit of green-belt land, not a stand-off in Government two years in, and not a Prime Minister in a spin, announcing ideas, but admitting that they all still need work. And we have not even left yet. The serious point is that current jobs, our future prospects and just-in-time manufacturing rely on getting this right, and peace in Northern Ireland relies on us getting this right. This is detail on which millions of jobs, lives and livelihoods depend, and detail that our real economic growers need sight of.

It is said that the hard-Brexit ideologues are prepared to sacrifice themselves to get what they want on this point, but there is no heroism here. It is not heroic to put a company out of business from the comfort of their places on the Green Benches. It is not heroic to put jobs at risk as they nod with their accomplices across the table at the latest Brexit dinner. No hero takes risks with others' lives when only they will live without the consequences of failure.

In Bury, we have businesses of all persuasions, ambitions and origins. Each of them tells me about their careful consideration of the implications, threats and, possibly, opportunities posed by leaving the EU, but they all want a customs union. As they weigh up their next moves, they should be enabled to do so with the best information—good and bad—that is available. Giving them such information will better prepare us all, because away from here, the prism through which Brexit is seen is that of communities, families, homes, jobs and prospects. That must also be our approach to Brexit: not deals in the dark, but information brought to light. Sharing the information from these Cabinet discussions is part of doing so.

A customs union is an economically literate plan that is supported by the CBI, as well as employers providing local jobs in Bury and elsewhere. It accepts the result of the referendum, allows us to move away from the stalled state of things as they are and lets us quickly get plans for a post-Brexit Britain. We need a transformation agenda to bring back to Labour the wards and communities in which people voted to leave because they felt left behind; and we need a modern vision for a country dealing with the world. The Government must stop wilfully adhering to threats made by a tiny rump of ideologues and do what is right by this country.

6.34 pm

**Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): Today's debate reflects the seriousness of the situation in which we have been left. We still have no idea about the Government's plan for what is next on customs. The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who is no longer in her place, mentioned groundhog day. It is certainly groundhog day when, two years on, we are still asking: what is the customs plan? We are still asking questions about what the Government plan to do next. This issue is not about this place and it is not about openness; it is about businesses being able to plan, it is about universities being able to plan, it is about individuals being able to plan.

At the moment, we are left with a form of Kremlinology, whereby we have to read between the lines to try to figure out what might be coming next. We have a stale Government with a past-her-sell-by-date leader. She is rolled out to paper over the cracks of a Government infighting behind the scenes. To be fair to the Foreign Secretary, he makes Kremlinology slightly easier by describing the Prime Minister's own plans as "crazy". Astonishingly, he is still in post.

What is not crazy are the challenges facing businesses. We know the economic analysis tells us that tens of thousands of jobs will be lost. GDP will be devastated, which means that income for public services will be devastated. We have so many outstanding questions, and not just on customs. What happens to immigration? What happens to research from which we all benefit? What happens to EU nationals?

It is clear that this is not going very well for the Government. If it is not going very well for the Government, then unfortunately it is not going very well for Scotland or any other part of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland where this means so much and should be taken so much more seriously.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman share my hope that the Conservative MPs from Scotland who were elected by hugely remain constituencies might respect that today and vote for the customs union?

**Stephen Gethins**: Yesterday, the Government and the Tories were left isolated over their current plans.

When they have been questioned about the analysis, the Government apparently told BuzzFeed News that it was not being published because it is a bit embarrassing. I am not surprised it is a bit embarrassing. This is all a bit embarrassing. The situation in which the United Kingdom as a whole has been left is a bit embarrassing.

This matters: it matters to business, it matters to researchers, it matters to EU nationals. Parliament has a role and a responsibility. It deserves to have as much information as it possibly can. Back the Opposition motion and publish!

6.38 pm

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): This Parliament, this country, businesses and the rest of the world are looking on in horror as our Government fight like cats in a sack over two unworkable proposals. No one can believe that a democratic country could put itself in this situation, doing so much damage to our businesses, our jobs and our future prospects.

The Government are refusing to release information on the advice they are getting from all sides, just as they whipped their MPs to refuse an economic impact assessment on the deal itself before we in Parliament have to vote on that deal. Anyone would think that the Government have something to hide: that they have no plan, that they have no strategy for avoiding the economic disaster that their own papers say they are heading for. They are doing everything except listen. They are not listening to those on their own Benches and they are not listening to British business.

Those of us on the Opposition Benches who have spoken to businesses in our constituencies have heard it loud and clear: they all want to be part of a customs union. It will be absolutely disastrous for our businesses if they are not part of a system of tariff-free borders and if they do not have regulatory alignment. Businesses in my constituency are already having to move abroad and set up offices and transfer jobs abroad, because they are being undermined by competitors in the European Union that are undercutting them and going to contractors, saying that UK companies cannot guarantee that they will be part of the customs union, that they will not have tariffs and that they will not have regulatory alignment. That is why we are losing business. It is happening.

The Government should listen to the Confederation of British Industry and the EEF, which said that

“the need for a post-Brexit customs union reflects what EEF and UK manufacturing have long called for... free and frictionless trade can only be achieved by comparable customs rules to those” we already enjoy. That is why businesses in my constituency told me loud and clear at a Brexit summit that I held that they all need to be part of a customs union to carry on trading and to enjoy the preferential deals with the rest of the world that they enjoy as part of the EU customs union. We cannot seek to match that. Australia has just 15 such deals, as does Canada, and they are worse than what we get as part of the EU. The Government need to do the decent thing by this Parliament, this country and by our businesses and make sure that we have transparency.

6.41 pm

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): Call me old-fashioned, but what is wrong with the House having papers, presentations and economic analyses on the Government’s post-Brexit preferred customs arrangements, including a customs partnership and maximum facilitation? What is wrong with that? What we have is a Government who are waiting, like Mr Micawber, for something to turn up. That is what it is.

The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) asked why we have this Humble Address motion before us. I will tell him why: it is because this Parliament is getting stitched up and gagged by the Tories. They would not allow amendments to the law in the Finance Bill. They have threatened the House of Lords. They have statutory instruments coming out of their ears and ministerial diktats will follow. That is why we have this motion. The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) told us that this Humble Address was a Mickey Mouse motion. Well, I tell you what: Mickey Mouse is 80 years old this year and he is a well-respected, popular icon—respected by generations and millions of people. If this is a Mickey Mouse Humble Address, I will have them every single day.

The hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) said, “Get on with it,” but what are we supposed to be getting on with? The Government do not actually know. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said that this is a shambles, that we are a laughing stock, and he is absolutely spot on. The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) said that we are undermining our negotiating position. Well, we do not have a negotiating position, so how can we undermine something that we do not have? It was particularly bizarre.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) talked about the threat to manufacturing in her constituency, which the Government do not care about. It is as simple as that. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) referred to Adam Smith and “The Wealth of Nations”. Let me remind him that before “The Wealth of Nations” came “The Theory of Moral Sentiments”. Well, there is nothing moral in what this Government are doing on this particular issue. There is secrecy, intrigue and furtiveness, and there is nothing moral about that whatsoever.

As for the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), what we want to know is: what did he have in his right pocket? Was it a Rubik’s cube or a redacted Brexit Sub-Committee minute? Get it out and let us have a look. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) mumbled something and then sat down. I think some of his hon. Friends should have done exactly the same thing and we might have been able to move on. The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) said that we need to take time to get it right. Well, we do not have the time because the Government have been dragging their feet for a year or more.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) said the Government were in chaos, and she was absolutely spot on. The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) said she wanted to deliver a sensible Brexit—well, get on with it then! We will join them, if they do want to deliver a sensible Brexit, but there is no suggestion they do. My hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) called it shambolic, and it is shambolic. It is as simple as that. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) said there was nothing heroic about putting people out of work, and he was absolutely spot on. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) said the Government were not listening, which sums it up, and we are losing business because of it.

In contemporary parlance, the Prime Minister is “shook”—totally unable to stand up to the right-wing press and back the only sensible way forward, which is

[Peter Dowd]

Labour's plan for a customs union. That is what we want. Instead, the Cabinet has been offered two options to decide between. First, we have what the Prime Minister calls a customs partnership. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has mentioned, this partnership would require UK officials to collect tariffs on behalf of the EU for any goods coming to the UK that are travelling onward to an EU state. As hon. Members have said, the Prime Minister's plan has been described as "crazy" by the Foreign Secretary and as having "significant question marks" by the Environment Secretary, while HMRC sources have called it "unviable" and suggested that Ministers are "having a laugh".

Perhaps the Minister can clarify: is the Prime Minister's preferred option "crazy" or merely "unviable"? It cannot be forgotten that HMRC resources have been decimated, with staffing and resourcing slashed by 17% since 2010. Nevertheless, the Government now think it appropriate to use what little resource is left to protect the EU's customs union for it, without the UK receiving the full economic benefits. This feels like the worst of all worlds.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that even if the Prime Minister can persuade her divided Cabinet and then the EU negotiators to accept one or other of those two proposals, neither would be ready before the end of the transition period? Is it not therefore time for the Government finally to admit that we will be remaining in a customs union with the EU for some time to come?

**Peter Dowd:** That is a fair assessment from my right hon. Friend.

As Members have mentioned already, we have been told by the Brexit Secretary that:

"Faced with intractable problems with political pressure for a solution, the government reaches for a headline grabbing high-tech 'solution'. Rather than spend the resources, time and thought necessary to get a real answer, they naively grasp solutions that to the technologically illiterate ministers look like magic."

It is not me who is suggesting that the Brexit Secretary has not acquired the technical prowess to rocket us into this scientific utopia; it is the Brexit Secretary himself. The Government's search for a magical fix to questions of such seriousness as the Northern Irish border leads us to believe that it is now in the public interest for Parliament itself to scrutinise the two options proposed by the Prime Minister. To do so, we must have access to the necessary information: in this case, the information contained in the papers, presentations and analyses provided to the Cabinet on each of these proposals.

Labour's position is clear. We would negotiate a customs union that would ensure a strong and collaborative future relationship with the EU, deliver the exact same benefits as we currently have with members of the single market and customs union, ensure the fair management of migration in the interests of the economy and communities, defend the rights of workers and environmental protections, prevent a race to the bottom, protect national security and our capacity to tackle cross-border crime and deliver for all the regions. Let us then expose the Government's total failure to reach a

feasible negotiating position and in the process move one step forward to the goal of a new customs union with the EU, which is a position, I suspect, that is backed by Members across the House and one that meets all the key conditions of a final exit settlement.

6.49 pm

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** This has been a wide-ranging debate. We have covered customs models and second referendums. We have covered the single market. There has even been a spirited attempt by my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) to challenge the very orderliness of the motion, and the Chair. He is a braver man than I am. We have heard the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) extol the virtues and the leadership qualities of Mickey Mouse, with which I am sure he is most familiar on his side of the House. However, I wish to bring Members back to the important matter of the motion, which calls for

"all papers, presentations and economic analyses"

presented to

"the European Union Exit and Trade (Strategy and Negotiations) Cabinet sub-committee, and its sub-committees"

to be laid before the House.

As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said in his opening speech, any papers or analyses created for the Cabinet are rightly confidential. That is a well-established principle. Ministers must be able to discuss policy issues at this level frankly and to debate the key matters of the day within a safe space. There is a real risk that if details of Cabinet Committee discussions were made publicly available, Ministers would feel restricted from being open and frank with one another. The quality of decision making would be diminished, the advice of officials would be exposed in the most unreasonable manner, the tendency to make oral decisions would be amplified and there might even be communication via post-it notes, as my right hon. Friend suggested.

I say this not in a partisan manner. It is an important principle that applies to any Government of any political composition. The concept is, of course, not new. My right hon. Friend quoted the former Home Secretary Jack Straw, whose own White Paper on freedom of information concluded:

"Now more than ever, government needs space and time in which to assess arguments and conduct its own debates with a degree of privacy."

**Anna McMorrin:** I thank the Minister for giving way so graciously, unlike his counterpart earlier.

As was mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), there have been reports today that the Government are considering shelving the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and incorporating elements of it in a withdrawal and implementation Bill. What does the Minister say to that? Can he confirm that those reports are inaccurate, rather than risking possible defeats on the customs union?

**Mel Stride:** I assure the hon. Lady that the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which has gone through the House of Lords, will, in due course, return to this House for further consideration in the normal manner.

The concept of which I have spoken has been accepted by successive Governments and Oppositions. It was explicitly recognised in the terms of the last motion for an Humble Address tabled by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), which called for documents to be made available on a confidential basis—a principle from which he appears now to have departed. By contrast, this Government have been consistent in respecting their obligations to Parliament.

Whether through debates on primary legislation in this place, Select Committee inquiries, statements to the House, written statements or parliamentary questions, Parliament has been kept updated and informed, and it will continue to be given ample opportunity to scrutinise the negotiations as they progress. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has made 10 oral statements in the House, Ministers from the Department for Exiting the European Union have made 84 written ministerial statements to both Houses and the Department has answered more than 1,700 parliamentary questions from Members and peers. Ministers from the Department have also appeared before a wide range of Select Committees in both Houses on 34 occasions. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), has given evidence before Westminster Committees on 10 occasions and to devolved Committees on six occasions, and looks forward to attending the Exiting the European Union Committee once again next week.

**Emma Reynolds:** We may have had 84 ministerial statements, but we only have five paragraphs on the Prime Minister's preferred option of the customs partnership in the "Future customs arrangements" paper of last August. When will we get more detail than those five paragraphs on that option?

**Mel Stride:** It might have escaped the hon. Lady's attention, but we announced this morning that there will be a further thoroughly comprehensive White Paper setting out all these matters, with further detail on the customs arrangements we may be seeking going forward. On customs in particular, I have in this House led many debates on behalf of the Government. I have led the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill through a Ways and Means debate, a Second Reading and four days in Committee. HMRC officials have sat before numerous Committees to provide evidence on the Government's position. Before that, the Government published a customs White Paper, to which the hon. Lady referred, on our future customs arrangement.

**Lady Hermon** *rose*—

**Mel Stride:** I can do nothing but give way to the hon. Lady.

**Lady Hermon:** The Minister and the House will be well aware of the comments that were made public last night by the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland about the threat from the new IRA dissidents who will exploit Brexit. That is in the public domain, so will the Minister give a commitment that redacted copies of those security briefings will be made available in the Library, or, if not in the Library, to the

Brexit Committee and its Chairman? That is already in the public domain through the words of the Chief Constable.

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Lady raises an important issue about the security of Northern Ireland, and the first point I would make is that we are absolutely crystal-clear that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland for the very reasons she raises. On her specific question about potentially receiving what would be some very sensitive information, albeit redacted, that would be best taken up with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, rather than by me making any specific comment from the Dispatch Box.

**Mr Kenneth Clarke** (Rushcliffe) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is still the Government's firm commitment that there will be no new physical infrastructure on the Irish border and some degree of regulatory convergence if necessary and no customs border down the Irish sea, so this will presumably apply to Dover, Holyhead and everywhere else? Will he confirm that, whatever discussions are going on, quite rightly, in private within the Government, those commitments remain absolutely firm?

**Mel Stride:** My right hon. and learned Friend will know that the joint report issued in December after the phase 1 negotiations covers exactly the issues to which he refers, and of course the Government will entirely stand by and remain committed to the commitments they made in that statement. The Government have this morning committed to publishing a further White Paper before the June European Council. This will communicate our ambition for the UK's future relationship with the EU in the context of our vision for the UK's future role in the world.

We have always been clear that we will not provide a running commentary on the internal work being carried out in the Government on these highly sensitive and vital negotiations. We are focused on delivering on the referendum result in the national interest, and that means having a stable and secure policy-making process inside the Government. It would not therefore make sense, and would go against the national interest, to release information that could in any way undermine the UK's position in our negotiations, a point the House has previously recognised. To provide details of the confidential discussions between Ministers regarding our negotiating strategy to those in the EU with whom we are negotiating would be a kind of madness that surely even the Labour party would find a stretch.

We have shown our willingness to share sensitive information with Parliament, but we will not do so to the detriment of our national interests. Let us see this motion for what it truly is. It is not a motion designed to assist our country at this critical time in our history, to secure our future outside the European Union or to help Parliament to fulfil its duty to our people. No, this is a motion about something rather less noble. It is a motion designed purely for the purposes of party politics and it should be seen for what it is. We should reject this motion today.

*Question put.*

*The House divided: Ayes 269, Noes 301.*

**Division No. 158]**

**[6.59 pm**

**AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
 Abrahams, Debbie  
 Ali, Rushanara  
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
 Amesbury, Mike  
 Antoniazzi, Tonia  
 Ashworth, Jonathan  
 Bardell, Hannah  
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin  
 Beckett, rh Margaret  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Berger, Luciana  
 Betts, Mr Clive  
 Blackford, rh Ian  
 Blomfield, Paul  
 Brabin, Tracy  
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
 Brennan, Kevin  
 Brock, Deidre  
 Brown, Alan  
 Brown, Lyn  
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
 Bryant, Chris  
 Buck, Ms Karen  
 Burden, Richard  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Butler, Dawn  
 Byrne, rh Liam  
 Cable, rh Sir Vince  
 Cadbury, Ruth  
 Cameron, Dr Lisa  
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie  
 Carden, Dan  
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Chapman, Douglas  
 Chapman, Jenny  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Cherry, Joanna  
 Clwyd, rh Ann  
 Coaker, Vernon  
 Coffey, Ann  
 Cooper, Julie  
 Cooper, Rosie  
 Cooper, rh Yvette  
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
 Cowan, Ronnie  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Crausby, Sir David  
 Crawley, Angela  
 Creagh, Mary  
 Creasy, Stella  
 Cruddas, Jon  
 Cummins, Judith  
 Cunningham, Alex  
 Cunningham, Mr Jim  
 Davey, rh Sir Edward  
 David, Wayne  
 Davies, Geraint  
 Day, Martyn  
 De Cordova, Marsha  
 De Piero, Gloria  
 Debbonaire, Thangam  
 Dent Coad, Emma

Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin  
 Dodds, Anneliese  
 Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Drew, Dr David  
 Dromey, Jack  
 Duffield, Rosie  
 Eagle, Ms Angela  
 Eagle, Maria  
 Edwards, Jonathan  
 Efford, Clive  
 Elliott, Julie  
 Ellman, Mrs Louise  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Evans, Chris  
 Farrelly, Paul  
 Farron, Tim  
 Fitzpatrick, Jim  
 Flint, rh Caroline  
 Fovargue, Yvonne  
 Frith, James  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gaffney, Hugh  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 George, Ruth  
 Gethins, Stephen  
 Gibson, Patricia  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Goodman, Helen  
 Grady, Patrick  
 Grant, Peter  
 Gray, Neil  
 Green, Kate  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Greenwood, Margaret  
 Griffith, Nia  
 Grogan, John  
 Gwynne, Andrew  
 Haigh, Louise  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hanson, rh David  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hayman, Sue  
 Healey, rh John  
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen  
 Hermon, Lady  
 Hill, Mike  
 Hobhouse, Wera  
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hosie, Stewart  
 Howarth, rh Mr George  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Jardine, Christine  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Johnson, Diana  
 Jones, Darren  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Graham P.  
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan  
 Jones, Sarah  
 Jones, Susan Elan

Kane, Mike  
 Keeley, Barbara  
 Kendall, Liz  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Killen, Ged  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kyle, Peter  
 Laird, Lesley  
 Lake, Ben  
 Lammy, rh Mr David  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Chris  
 Lee, Karen  
 Leslie, Mr Chris  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Lewis, Mr Ivan  
 Linden, David  
 Lloyd, Stephen  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 Lucas, Caroline  
 Lucas, Ian C.  
 Lynch, Holly  
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
 Mahmood, Shabana  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Mann, John  
 Marsden, Gordon  
 Martin, Sandy  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Matheson, Christian  
 Mc Nally, John  
 McCabe, Steve  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McDonagh, Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm  
 McDonald, Stuart C.  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
 McGinn, Conor  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McMahan, Jim  
 McMorrin, Anna  
 Mearns, Ian  
 Miliband, rh Edward  
 Monaghan, Carol  
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Murray, Ian  
 Nandy, Lisa  
 Newlands, Gavin  
 Norris, Alex  
 O'Hara, Brendan  
 O'Mara, Jared  
 Onasanya, Fiona  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Owen, Albert  
 Peacock, Stephanie  
 Pearce, Teresa  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Perkins, Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Phillipson, Bridget  
 Pidcock, Laura  
 Platt, Jo

Pollard, Luke  
 Pound, Stephen  
 Powell, Lucy  
 Rashid, Faisal  
 Rayner, Angela  
 Reed, Mr Steve  
 Rees, Christina  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reeves, Rachel  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Reynolds, Jonathan  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Rowley, Danielle  
 Ruane, Chris  
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
 Ryan, rh Joan  
 Saville Roberts, Liz  
 Shah, Naz  
 Sharma, Mr Virendra  
 Sherriff, Paula  
 Shuker, Mr Gavin  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Skinner, Mr Dennis  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smith, Angela  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, Eleanor  
 Smith, Laura  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smith, Owen  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Spellar, rh John  
 Starmer, rh Keir  
 Stephens, Chris  
 Stevens, Jo  
 Stone, Jamie  
 Streeting, Wes  
 Sweeney, Mr Paul  
 Tami, Mark  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
 Thornberry, rh Emily  
 Timms, rh Stephen  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Turley, Anna  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twigg, Stephen  
 Twist, Liz  
 Umunna, Chuka  
 Vaz, rh Keith  
 Vaz, Valerie  
 Walker, Thelma  
 Watson, Tom  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Matt  
 Whitehead, Dr Alan  
 Whitfield, Martin  
 Whitford, Dr Philippa  
 Williams, Hywel  
 Williams, Dr Paul  
 Williamson, Chris  
 Wilson, Phil  
 Wishart, Pete  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

**Nic Dakin and  
 Jeff Smith**

## NOES

Afolami, Bim	Duddridge, James	Hurd, rh Mr Nick	Parish, Neil
Afriyie, Adam	Duguid, David	Jack, Mr Alister	Patel, rh Priti
Aldous, Peter	Duncan, rh Sir Alan	James, Margot	Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Allan, Lucy	Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil	Pawsey, Mark
Allen, Heidi	Dunne, Mr Philip	Jenkin, Mr Bernard	Penrose, John
Amess, Sir David	Ellis, Michael	Jenkyns, Andrea	Percy, Andrew
Andrew, Stuart	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Jenrick, Robert	Perry, rh Claire
Argar, Edward	Elphicke, Charlie	Johnson, Dr Caroline	Philp, Chris
Atkins, Victoria	Eustice, George	Johnson, Gareth	Pincher, Christopher
Bacon, Mr Richard	Evans, Mr Nigel	Johnson, Joseph	Poulter, Dr Dan
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi	Evennett, rh David	Jones, Andrew	Prentis, Victoria
Baker, Mr Steve	Fabricant, Michael	Jones, rh Mr David	Prisk, Mr Mark
Barclay, Stephen	Fallon, rh Sir Michael	Jones, Mr Marcus	Pritchard, Mark
Baron, Mr John	Field, rh Mark	Kawczynski, Daniel	Pursglove, Tom
Bebb, Guto	Ford, Vicky	Keegan, Gillian	Quin, Jeremy
Bellingham, Sir Henry	Foster, Kevin	Kennedy, Seema	Quince, Will
Berry, Jake	Fox, rh Dr Liam	Kerr, Stephen	Raab, Dominic
Blackman, Bob	Francois, rh Mr Mark	Knight, rh Sir Greg	Redwood, rh John
Blunt, Crispin	Frazer, Lucy	Knight, Julian	Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Boles, Nick	Freeman, George	Kwarteng, Kwasi	Robertson, Mr Laurence
Bone, Mr Peter	Freer, Mike	Lamont, John	Robinson, Gavin
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Fysh, Mr Marcus	Lancaster, rh Mark	Robinson, Mary
Bowie, Andrew	Gale, Sir Roger	Latham, Mrs Pauline	Rosindell, Andrew
Bradley, Ben	Garnier, Mark	Leadsom, rh Andrea	Ross, Douglas
Brady, Sir Graham	Gauke, rh Mr David	Lee, Dr Phillip	Rowley, Lee
Braverman, Suella	Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Lefroy, Jeremy	Rudd, rh Amber
Brereton, Jack	Gibb, rh Nick	Leigh, Sir Edward	Rutley, David
Bridgen, Andrew	Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl	Letwin, rh Sir Oliver	Sandbach, Antoinette
Brine, Steve	Girvan, Paul	Lewer, Andrew	Scully, Paul
Brokenshire, rh James	Glen, John	Lewis, rh Brandon	Seely, Mr Bob
Bruce, Fiona	Goldsmith, Zac	Lewis, rh Dr Julian	Selous, Andrew
Buckland, Robert	Gove, rh Michael	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian	Shannon, Jim
Burghart, Alex	Graham, Luke	Lidington, rh Mr David	Shapps, rh Grant
Burns, Conor	Graham, Richard	Little Pengelly, Emma	Sharma, Alok
Burt, rh Alistair	Grant, Mrs Helen	Lopez, Julia	Shelbrooke, Alec
Cairns, rh Alun	Gray, James	Lopresti, Jack	Simpson, David
Cartlidge, James	Grayling, rh Chris	Lord, Mr Jonathan	Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Cash, Sir William	Green, Chris	Loughton, Tim	Skidmore, Chris
Caulfield, Maria	Green, rh Damian	Mackinlay, Craig	Smith, Chloe
Chalk, Alex	Greening, rh Justine	Macleane, Rachel	Smith, Henry
Chishti, Rehman	Grieve, rh Mr Dominic	Main, Mrs Anne	Smith, rh Julian
Chope, Sir Christopher	Griffiths, Andrew	Mak, Alan	Smith, Royston
Churchill, Jo	Gyimah, Mr Sam	Malthouse, Kit	Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Clark, Colin	Hair, Kirstene	Mann, Scott	Soubry, rh Anna
Clark, rh Greg	Halfon, rh Robert	Masterton, Paul	Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth	Hall, Luke	Maynard, Paul	Spencer, Mark
Clarke, Mr Simon	Hammond, rh Mr Philip	McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick	Stevenson, John
Cleverly, James	Hammond, Stephen	McPartland, Stephen	Stewart, Bob
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hancock, rh Matt	McVey, rh Ms Esther	Stewart, Iain
Collins, Damian	Hands, rh Greg	Menzies, Mark	Stewart, Rory
Costa, Alberto	Harper, rh Mr Mark	Mercer, Johnny	Streeter, Mr Gary
Courts, Robert	Harrington, Richard	Merriman, Huw	Stride, rh Mel
Crabb, rh Stephen	Harris, Rebecca	Metcalfe, Stephen	Stuart, Graham
Crouch, Tracey	Harrison, Trudy	Miller, rh Mrs Maria	Sturdy, Julian
Davies, Chris	Hart, Simon	Mills, Nigel	Sunak, Rishi
Davies, David T. C.	Hayes, rh Mr John	Milton, rh Anne	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Davies, Glyn	Heald, rh Sir Oliver	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew	Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Davies, Mims	Heapey, James	Moore, Damien	Syms, Sir Robert
Davies, Philip	Heaton-Harris, Chris	Mordaunt, rh Penny	Thomas, Derek
Davis, rh Mr David	Heaton-Jones, Peter	Morris, Anne Marie	Thomson, Ross
Dinenage, Caroline	Henderson, Gordon	Morris, David	Throup, Maggie
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Herbert, rh Nick	Morris, James	Tolhurst, Kelly
Docherty, Leo	Hinds, rh Damian	Morton, Wendy	Tomlinson, Justin
Dodds, rh Nigel	Hoare, Simon	Mundell, rh David	Tomlinson, Michael
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.	Hollingbery, George	Murray, Mrs Sheryll	Tracey, Craig
Donelan, Michelle	Hollinrake, Kevin	Murrison, Dr Andrew	Tredinnick, David
Dorries, Ms Nadine	Holloway, Adam	Neill, Robert	Truss, rh Elizabeth
Double, Steve	Howell, John	Newton, Sarah	Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Dowden, Oliver	Huddleston, Nigel	Nokes, rh Caroline	Vara, Mr Shailesh
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Hughes, Eddie	Norman, Jesse	Vickers, Martin
Drax, Richard	Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy	Opperman, Guy	Villiers, rh Theresa
		Paisley, Ian	Walker, Mr Charles

Walker, Mr Robin  
Wallace, rh Mr Ben  
Warburton, David  
Warman, Matt  
Watling, Giles  
Whately, Helen  
Whittaker, Craig  
Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
Wiggin, Bill  
Williamson, rh Gavin

Wilson, rh Sammy  
Wollaston, Dr Sarah  
Wood, Mike  
Wragg, Mr William  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Zahawi, Nadhim

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
Amanda Milling and  
Nigel Adams

*Question accordingly negated.*

**Mr Speaker:** People are curious. A Member beetled up to me to say he wanted to raise a point of order, but the fellow is not around. He has beetled off; he has beetled out; he has beetled somewhere else. [HON. MEMBERS: "Name him!"] I am prevented from naming him by the phenomenon with which the House is well familiar, namely my natural restraint and understatement.

## PETITION

### Provision of Changing Places Toilet Facilities

7.14 pm

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): One in 260 people need Changing Places toilets with an adult-sized changing bench and hoist to have their toileting needs met in a timely, dignified and humane way, so I have great pleasure in presenting this petition, which was gathered together by my constituent Lorna Fillingham, of more than 50,000 names of people who recognise the importance of this issue across this country.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of North Lincolnshire and the wider United Kingdom,

Declares that the Government must take urgent action to change building and planning regulations to ensure that changing places/toilet facilities have an adult changing bench, hoist and enough space for two carers.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to provide these requirements to all large public buildings which are currently being built, redeveloped or refurbished.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002148]

## Fire Safety Cladding: Heysmoor Heights

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

7.16 pm

**Mrs Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Today, following the campaigning of MPs across the country, the Prime Minister made a commitment to fund replacement cladding for some of the properties at risk following the Grenfell Tower catastrophe in June 2017. Her welcome statement refers to properties owned by councils and housing associations, but it leaves residents in privately owned tower blocks, such as those in Heysmoor Heights, Liverpool, out in the cold. They face bills of £18,000 to keep safe following the horrendous failings exposed by the Grenfell catastrophe.

After Grenfell, Heysmoor Heights was inspected by Merseyside fire and rescue authority—with commendable speed. It was found to have dangerous ACM—aluminium composite material—cladding. Fire marshals were put in place, and all lethal cladding has now been removed and is being replaced.

Heysmoor Heights is a 16-storey block comprising 98 flats, 63 of which are owned by Grainger plc. Grainger has funded the costs of fire safety measures for its flats, but it is unclear whether those costs will be reflected in higher rents or service charges in the future. The private leaseholders face major problems and anxiety. Theirs are modest properties, with a value of between £80,000 and £100,000, yet they are required to pay £18,000. How can hard-pressed residents find £18,000? Is the value of their flats affected by what is happening? Will more work be required, thus requiring more funding? It is unjust for residents to be facing demands to foot the bill to keep them safe because the regulatory system failed.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the hon. Lady in raising an issue that is gripping the House this week. Does she agree that every social housing provider, local authority and landlord who is paid from the public purse has a duty of care and must ensure that buildings are up to the highest safety standard; and that where that is not the case, they must carry out the work necessary to bring the building up to that standard? That should be their responsibility.

**Mrs Ellman:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman; he makes an important point. Who should pay? Who is responsible for putting the situation right? The position is obscure and complex. The original development company, FM Heysmoor Heights Ltd, was dissolved in August 2014. It went into administration in 2010 after building renovation works were completed.

The current freeholder is an anonymous beneficial owner: Abacus Land 4 Ltd, an offshore company based in Guernsey. It is part of the Long Harbour Ground Rent Fund, which is thought to be worth £1.6 billion. HomeGround is responsible for the day-to-day management of the company. It has appointed the Residential Management Group—RMG—to manage the block.

RMG tells me that an insurance claim—taken out in 2008 by the now defunct FM Heysmoor Heights Ltd—is currently being pursued with Lloyd's against the original

build guarantee. That could see an insurance warranty meet some or all of the costs incurred, but we do not know if this will happen.

RMG first raised the claim on 18 October 2017, but no decision has yet been reached. The claim has now been submitted to the formal complaints process via the Lloyd's underwriter. When will there be a response? Will it be adequate? There are no answers in sight to those important questions.

The public inquiry into the Grenfell disaster is not due to start until next week. Indeed, there is still dispute about how it will proceed. A separate investigation into building regulations—the Hackitt inquiry—is due to report soon, and I understand that there may be a statement on that tomorrow.

Those investigations involve complex issues, including safety assessments, warranties, installations, certification and regulation. They could include questions of criminality. Years could pass before legal culpability in relation to any individual property is established but, in the meantime, my constituents face bills of £18,000. Payment by instalments is being offered in some cases, and sums of around £2,000 are being added to the quarterly service charge for some individual residents. That is an enormous amount to find. The situation is highly stressful, and payment by instalments does not reduce the size of the bill, which remains £18,000.

I have campaigned strongly on this issue on behalf of my constituents, as have other hon. Members on behalf of theirs. I first raised the matter with the then Secretary of State in October 2017. His response, dated 11 December 2017, stated:

“Where costs do not naturally fall on the freeholder, landlord or those acting on their behalf I urge those with responsibility to follow the lead of the social sector and private companies already doing the right thing and not attempt to pass the costs to leaseholders”.

I have continued to pursue that important matter in the House and I have made further representations to the Minister.

The Minister told me this week in a letter, and in an answer to a written parliamentary question, that

“the morally right thing for building owners to do is to take responsibility for meeting the cost of remediation and interim safety measures without charging leaseholders”,

and that

“building owners should do all they can to protect leaseholders from paying these bills. This could mean funding it themselves or funding it through warranties or legal action”.

The residents of Heysmoor Heights cannot wait for long and potentially protracted negotiations with the insurance company to be resolved. There is no guarantee that a satisfactory solution will be reached.

A letter I received today from HomeGround confirms that, should the insurance route fail, costs will be recovered through increased service charges. That is simply not good enough.

The Minister tells me that he will speak to the agent of the freeholder at Heysmoor Heights. Will he attempt to establish the identity of the owner—or owners—of the offshore Abacus Land 4 Ltd, an anonymous beneficial company?

There has been a further recent development. Barratt Developments, owners of Citiscape in Croydon, have

now agreed to pay the costs of cladding removal and fire safety measures for their residents. The Minister's letter to me states:

“I am aware of some private sector building owners who are not charging leaseholders and, as you know, the previous Secretary of State urged others to follow suit”.

I call for the same treatment for the residents of Heysmoor Heights. What is good enough for the people of Croydon is good enough for the people of Liverpool.

Let us remember what all this is about: 71% of people at Grenfell Tower lost their lives because of grotesque failings in fire safety. Inquiries are yet to establish precise liability and culpability. The catastrophe at Grenfell exposed the danger in other high-rise buildings, including at Heysmoor Heights, yet it is the residents who are being asked to foot the bill to protect their safety in a situation they did not create.

Today, the Prime Minister bowed to the inevitable and agreed to refund the cost of replacement cladding for councils and housing associations. The campaigns throughout the country have been successful, but residents have been put through too much stress for too long. What about the situation for the private residents—the leaseholders—at Heysmoor Heights? The Prime Minister did not give any answer to their calls for help. They must not be abandoned. I call on the Government to act to ensure that residents do not foot this bill—it is a question of justice.

7.25 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry):** I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman)—Liverpool is my home city—for the extraordinary campaign she is fighting on behalf of the local residents she has the privilege to represent. She has asked written and oral parliamentary questions, and has now secured this important debate.

As the hon. Lady mentioned, my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing has arranged to speak to the agents of Heysmoor Heights' freeholder, and I will certainly ask him to ask the agent who the freeholders are, because she has highlighted a very serious issue. We cannot have a situation in which the residents simply do not know who their superior landlord is. That would not have been acceptable to me in my old job as a property lawyer. I shall make sure that the Housing Minister presses very hard on that issue, and that if an answer is received, it is passed on to the hon. Lady so that she can forward it to her constituents.

**Mrs Ellman:** Does the Minister agree that it is outrageous that the residents are being asked to pay this bill but the private leaseholders do not know the freeholder's identity? When the Housing Minister speaks to the freeholder's agent, will he ask the freeholder to foot the bill?

**Jake Berry:** The ownership of property is of course subject to the public record. I suspect that the hon. Lady may be getting at the fact that even when the Land Registry has a name on the register, it is sometimes tied up with foreign companies in jurisdictions that do not have the same transparency rules that we have for our companies. I will absolutely ensure that my hon. Friend the Housing Minister presses for the answer to who the freehold owners are. On her point about asking the

[*Jake Berry*]

freehold owners to pay the bill, I hope that the hon. Lady will hear in the rest of my speech the approach the Government are going to take.

Before I deal specifically with the hugely important issue of the residents of Heysmoor Heights, I wish to discuss the wider debates we are having in Parliament this week about the terrible tragedy at Grenfell Tower, which the hon. Lady touched on. This is the first opportunity I have had to speak about those tragic events, and I wish to put on record my personal sorrow. The Government remain absolutely determined that this should never happen again. It should never have happened in the first place. I think everyone in the House would agree that we have a duty to work together to ensure that a tragedy on that scale is never repeated.

Following the fire, the Government's first priority was quite rightly to help the families who were affected and enable them to rebuild their lives, while continuing to remember with great respect—as we have already today—the people who lost their lives in those tragic events.

The impact of the Grenfell fire is wide-reaching, and I can assure the House that the Government are absolutely determined to learn the lessons and to take all necessary steps to ensure the safety of residents now and in the future. Earlier today, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out how the Government continue to work with fire and rescue services, local authorities and landlords to identify high-rise buildings with unsafe cladding. That enables us to both ensure that interim measures are put in place with our partners and give building owners clear advice about what they need to do, over both short term and the longer term, to keep their residents safe.

To support that, we have appointed an expert panel to take the necessary steps to ensure the safety of residents of high-rise buildings. Following its recommendations, the Government provided advice to building owners on the interim measures that they should put in place to ensure the safety of their residents. I note that the hon. Lady said that the ACM cladding has already been removed from the building as part of those interim measures. We swiftly identified social housing blocks and public buildings with unsafe cladding, and all the affected social sector buildings that we have identified now have these measures in place.

In parallel, we tested different combinations of cladding and insulation to see which of them meets the current building regulations guidance. We published consolidated advice in September confirming the results of those tests, together with further advice for building owners. At the same time, we asked Dame Judith Hackitt to undertake an independent review of building regulations, and we are taking forward all the recommendations for Government from her interim report and look forward to the statement tomorrow about the final report to which the hon. Lady referred.

We believe that we have identified all affected social housing blocks and public buildings. With regard to private sector buildings, which tonight's debate is about, the Government have made their testing facilities available free of charge, and we continue to urge all building owners to submit samples for testing if they think that they may have unsafe cladding on their building.

In addition, we wrote to local authorities in August asking them to identify privately owned buildings in their area with potentially unsafe cladding and reminding them that that was in line with their statutory duty to ensure that residents are kept safe. The majority of local authorities have recognised the urgency of that work and have provided relevant information to the Government. I wish to put it on the record that we are grateful for all the hard work that local authorities have done in this regard.

We have been in constant and close collaboration with local authorities ever since the Grenfell fire tragedy, but this is not a straightforward task, particularly in cases such as the one referred to by the hon. Lady where building owners either cannot be traced or are proving unresponsive. To support local authorities in this work, we announced in March a financial support package of £1 million to assist the most affected local authorities.

Our measures will also help local authorities to take enforcement action to ensure that hazards in residential buildings in their areas are remediated as quickly as possible. I can assure hon. Members that, as soon as we are notified of buildings with potentially unsafe cladding, we will work with the relevant local authority and the National Fire Chiefs Council to ensure that interim measures are put in place.

**Mrs Ellman:** The Minister is giving some very important information, but he is not addressing the central issue of this debate. What will happen about the £18,000 bills that the private leaseholders at Heysmoor Heights are facing? What will the Government do about that?

**Jake Berry:** The hon. Lady referred to the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister today of £400 million of new Government funding to help local authorities and housing associations focus their efforts on removing ACM cladding. We have also provided other financial flexibilities for local authorities that need to undertake other essential fire safety work. As she has asked me very specifically to address the issue of the private sector, let me tell her that, in the private sector, we continue to urge those responsible to follow the lead set by the social sector and not to attempt to pass on the costs to residents. They can do that by meeting the costs themselves, or by looking at alternative routes such as insurance claim warranties and legal action.

Although I do not want to be drawn into the specifics of the insurance claim that is going on regarding Heysmoor Heights, I echo the hon. Lady's call for Lloyd's to get on and process that claim as quickly as possible. She mentioned the stage of the process that the claim has reached. As she correctly points out, it is the uncertainty—the £18,000 bill, albeit that it a potential bill at this point—hanging over the residents that is so unsettling for them. I commend Barratt for stepping into the breach and covering the remediation costs at Citiscape in Croydon. I am sure the Housing Minister will be making a point about the good behaviour of Barratt when he speaks to the agent of the Heysmoor Heights freeholder shortly.

Where building owners are seeking to pass on remediation costs to leaseholders, it is important that leaseholders can access specialist legal advice and understand their rights under leases, which are often long and complicated documents. It is absolutely correct that the Government

have worked with the Leasehold Advisory Service—LEASE—to provide additional funding for independent, free, initial advice so that leaseholders are not only aware of their rights under the lease but are supported to understand the terms of these often complicated legal documents. LEASE continues to provide valuable support to affected leaseholders around the country. If the leaseholders at Heysmoor Heights have not done so already, I would encourage them to get in touch with the Leasehold Advisory Service to get some initial advice about their potential liability. The Secretary of State will also be holding a roundtable on the barriers to the remediation of buildings that have unsafe aluminium composite material cladding.

We are keeping the situation under review. I will specifically draw tonight's debate to the attention of the Housing Minister. I will ask him to keep the residents of Heysmoor Heights informed, and to keep under review the progress not just of the insurance claim but of the wider question about where liability lies. We want to ensure that costs are not passed on to leaseholders, because they should not be. The hon. Lady quoted the

Housing Minister, who said that there is a moral obligation not to pass those costs on to leaseholders. I absolutely agree with both him and the hon. Lady in that regard.

I hope that the points I have made this evening have reassured hon. Members just how seriously the Government are treating the issue of building safety. We will continue to make the case to building owners that we absolutely do not expect these costs to be passed on to the leaseholders of Heysmoor Heights or anywhere else. We will continue to provide support through LEASE to leaseholders who are faced with these unexpected bills, and we will continue to take all necessary steps to ensure that residents feel safe and secure in their homes. We will keep the situation under review. It is important to say that we have not ruled out any options at this stage.

As a proud son of Liverpool, I will finish by directly quoting the hon. Lady: what is good enough for Croydon is good enough for Liverpool and the residents of Heysmoor Heights.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.38 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Wednesday 16 May 2018

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

## NHS 70th Anniversary

9.30 am

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 70th anniversary of the NHS and public health.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. The 70th anniversary of the NHS is an important time for the country, but it is also a special time for Blaenau Gwent. Aneurin Bevan, and the health service he created, was born and bred in Blaenau Gwent—in Tredegar. Since Nye's death in the 1960s, Blaenau Gwent MPs have followed in the footsteps of a colossus. We in the borough are immensely proud and fiercely protective of his legacy. When he said he wanted to “Tredegar-ise” the NHS, he was basing his plans on the Tredegar Medical Aid Society, a mutual and an organisation established for all, supported and funded by the people of Tredegar, whether they be miners at the Ty Trist colliery, like my grandfather George, quarry workers at Trefil or nurses at the St James Hospital. If Bevan established an NHS for the 20th century, at this anniversary it is important that we ask ourselves what sort of NHS we need for the 21st century.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): I should declare an interest as a biographer of Aneurin Bevan. Before my hon. Friend moves on to talk more generally about the future, does he agree that the decision to nationalise the hospitals, and the painstaking work that Bevan did in negotiations with the British Medical Association, mean that he truly is the architect of the national health service?

**Nick Smith:** My hon. Friend has written a terrific biography of Aneurin Bevan. He absolutely captured what Nye did for us all.

On 5 July it will not be good enough just to celebrate the past, the history of this brilliant institution and its architect; we must also look to its future and the challenges it now faces. Many of those challenges have been created by eight years of Tory austerity, which has left our national health service underfunded, understaffed and underprepared. Labour would provide more doctors and nurses and provide a funding level to support the service for years to come. Other challenges cannot be put down to politics. The epidemics of old—diseases once fatal that we have almost eradicated—are being replaced with new health problems that are putting massive strains on our NHS. It is wonderful that people are now living longer, but that also means our population is an ageing one that needs support. As our society gets to grips with caring for our mental health, more people need access to these services than ever before.

Today I want to concentrate on another big challenge: rising levels of obesity, particularly among children. In this case, it is a challenge where an ounce of prevention can be better than a pound of cure. Back in Blaenau

Gwent, surveys estimate that 70% of adults are overweight or obese and 11% are being treated for diabetes. Most troublingly, the latest figures from the child measurement programme reveal that last year 15% of four and five-year-olds in my constituency were classed as obese. We should all be worried by that trend, which is being replicated across our country.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making some important points. Does he agree that we should urge Ministers to take more of a lead in restricting junk food advertising and to provide extra money and the consequential to the Welsh health service for such things as earlier intervention by GPs and practice nurses?

**Nick Smith:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. As always, she is ahead of the game—I will come on to that point shortly.

Obesity is the second biggest preventable cause of cancer. Diabetes leads to significant complications, including, in extreme cases, amputation. The consequences for our society are massive. NHS England has said that around £16 billion a year is spent on the direct medical costs of diabetes and conditions related to being overweight or obese. That is more than the cost of delivering all our countries' police and fire services combined. The Government cannot shirk their responsibility to tackle the issue head on. When the next chapter of their childhood obesity plan comes into effect, it needs an effective UK-wide public health drive. It needs to do more to deal with that priority. The 2015 Conservative manifesto pledge to clamp down on advertising unhealthy brands vanished into thin air by the time of the first childhood obesity plan.

It now looks like junk food ads may be banned from programmes where three quarters of the viewers are children. That is to be applauded. It is a good thing, but it fails to tackle the big primetime shows that families gather around the sofa for: shows such as “The X Factors” and the aptly named “Saturday Night Takeaway”. That is without mentioning, with the World cup on the horizon, the premium advertising space around sport. There is a real contradiction when fantastic displays of athletic prowess are bookended by burgers and packaged with pizzas.

Alongside others, Cancer Research UK is pushing for a 9 o'clock watershed for junk food adverts, and the Government must consider that proposal seriously. It is not only me who thinks that; the head of the NHS, Simon Stevens, thinks it would be a good way to tackle this scourge. He believes that even the likes of Facebook must be roped into any plans that limit junk food advertising. The Jamie Oliver Food Foundation suggests having mandatory training for GPs and health professionals to talk about weight in a helpful way and to refer patients to nutritional experts. Whatever the Government decide, they will need to be bold in the face of pressure from the industry heavyweights and their lobbying teams. When plans emerge from this Government, every organisation should be doing their bit.

I was pleased to see the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, take real steps to address junk food advertising last week with his announcement that such adverts are to be banned from the tube and bus networks. Almost 40% of London's 10 and 11-year-olds are obese or overweight. The Mayor is taking a positive step to

[Nick Smith]

tackle what he has rightly called “a ticking time bomb”, and that must be supported. However, it is up to all public bodies, including devolved Administrations, councils and housing associations, to weigh in. Primary schools should promote walking every day to their pupils. It is about using soft power and nudge, as well as improved regulation to make legislative and cultural change.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is talking about action to tackle childhood obesity and junk food adverts, and also about Jamie Oliver. He will perhaps be aware that Jamie Oliver met the First Minister of Scotland on Monday and welcomed and supported the Scottish Government’s plan to halve childhood obesity by 2030. Would he care to welcome that, as Jamie Oliver did?

**Nick Smith:** I am pleased to welcome that support for a UK issue that we all need to work on.

With further support, we could achieve the healthy lifestyles that so many people want by using influence and our voices. I want to round this speech off with one initiative that I think deserves real backing. It will help our society get on track to healthier lifestyles. To return to Bevan, the initiative is about harnessing community support to deliver improved health for all. Dame Kelly Holmes teamed up with the NHS and parkrun last weekend to encourage people to “take care of yourself” in the build-up to a special parkrun for the NHS on 9 June. My local parkrun group is the Parc Bryn Bach running club, and I can report what a difference such initiatives can make. After a year of running every week, my blood pressure is down and I have tightened my belt a few notches.

I am grateful for the esprit de corps of my local running club. Parc Bryn Bach has Saturday parkruns, special Sunday sessions for parkrun juniors and is a backer of the brilliant NHS Couch to 5k scheme. Just a few Mondays ago, it had 150 people running through a wet, windy April evening to get their fitness up. Over three months, many of those local people will gain confidence and a level of fitness to help them change their lifestyle. The camaraderie and support on offer is fantastic, and that is what makes these schemes fun to join and easy to keep up. Unsurprisingly, the club membership has doubled in recent years, and the coaches and volunteers include many health professionals. They are a great team. I am pleased that the Welsh Labour Government have seen the value of that. Welsh Athletics is supporting clubs with regional Couch to 5k programmes.

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate him on his passionate speech that marks this historic anniversary and the part that his constituency and the wider south Wales region played in the formation of the NHS. Does he agree that in order to tackle our modern health challenges it is important that we have further investment and that the UK Government match the Welsh Government’s passion and commitment to this most cherished national institution?

**Nick Smith:** As usual, my hon. Friend and neighbour makes a very good point. I went on his Merthyr parkrun a few months ago and had a good time.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Nick Smith:** I am pleased to give way to my other neighbour.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** I join my hon. Friend in congratulating all those involved in parkrun. Will he join me in congratulating the volunteers who make parkrun possible in his constituency and in mine in Pontypool and Cwmbran, where I too have taken part in parkruns, but I have not quite reached my hon. Friend’s running level yet?

**Nick Smith:** I thank my hon. Friend for supporting parkrun. Perhaps we should have a south Wales eastern region parkrun championship at some point in the coming months. He is absolutely right about volunteers and the running club supporters who are out there at 9 o’clock on a Saturday morning, or sometimes on a Sunday morning for the junior parkrun, in parks all across the country. They do a great job in all weather. It is brilliant to see. More than 30,000 runners took part in parkruns in Wales alone last year. It is that sort of activity with cross-body support and backing from our community role models that can make a big difference to making such schemes stick.

When Nye wanted to Tredegar-ise the national health service, he wanted a service built on community where we all bought in and all had a stake. In that spirit the public health challenges we face 70 years on should not be tackled alone. To truly take care of ourselves, we need a society that sets us up for success, a system that has our backs, a public service that recognises what needs to be changed and how to do it. The Government have a real chance to honour the anniversary of the national health service in the months ahead, not with pomp and ceremony, but with the sort of action that people will celebrate another 70 years from now.

**Stewart Hosie (in the Chair):** Numerous Members wish to speak and I intend to start the summing-up speeches at about 10.30. Members are not particularly time limited, but speeches of six or seven minutes will get everybody in.

9.42 am

**Bill Grant** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) on securing this important celebratory debate.

On 5 July this year we will mark 70 years of the NHS across the whole of the United Kingdom. Although now a devolved matter, the same core principle of safe, effective, person-centred care applies and it remains free at the point of delivery throughout the United Kingdom. I have no doubt that, no matter where we live on these islands, the NHS is the British institution most loved and valued by the public.

For the past seven decades, millions in the United Kingdom have known that they can rely on the NHS in their hour of need, to treat them when they are sick or injured and help them keep fit and healthy—most importantly, without discrimination. That principle has worked well for 70 years because of the dedication of

generations of hard-working NHS staff. In this anniversary year, it is only right that we should thank all NHS staff, past and present, in Scotland and across the United Kingdom for their dedication and service. Mr Hosie, I should have declared an interest. I have two daughters who are nursing professionals in NHS Ayrshire and Arran.

This is indeed a time to reflect on the progress that the NHS has made since 1948 and consider what steps we should take over the next seven decades to ensure that the national health service continues to provide the best possible service to the British public, who very much rely on it.

In 1948, the newly created NHS was more concerned with childhood malnutrition than with obesity. Penicillin, discovered by Sir Alexander Fleming, physician and Nobel prize winner, who was born in Ayrshire in Scotland in 1881, was a relatively new and revolutionary treatment. Polio, tuberculosis and rickets were of major concern as opposed to dementia, the diabetes that was mentioned earlier, and the cancer conditions experienced today.

It is worth noting the progress that the NHS and society in general have made in recent years in recognising the need for improved mental health provision. Health is health, whether we categorise it as mental or physical. The UK Government's introduction of parity between mental and physical health was a vital and important step forward, and I am glad that the Scottish Government have followed suit.

As our population ages—I fall into that category—and our society changes, the challenges that the NHS faces in health promotion and health and wellbeing will continue to evolve. We need an NHS that is adaptable and committed to embracing new technologies such as genomics wherever possible, and it must be well resourced to meet the increase in demand. I mentioned earlier the dedication of the staff, but it is crucial that there are enough skilled staff to meet today's demanding and changing workload. Sadly, today's national health service as a whole has vacancies and challenges in recruiting across the spectrum, whether nurses, allied health professionals or medics. There are too many gaps in the system, which has led to significant funds being paid on overtime and expensive agency nurses. We need to resolve the long-standing UK-wide conundrum of delayed discharges from acute care beds by ensuring that patients are cared for safely in the most appropriate, supported environment.

Over the past 70 years the NHS has been a great success based on a great principle. We are living longer and healthier lives as a result. May I commend the Labour Government who, 70 years ago, in the dark days of a post-war Britain, had the courage and foresight to create the national health service, and also successive Governments, including, dare I say, Conservative Governments, who have supported the service that we all continue to value so much?

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): If I were able to make a speech, which I cannot, I would talk about public health even before the health service. However, let me remind everyone that on the creation of the national health service, in January 1944, Henry Willink, a Conservative Minister in the coalition Government, held up the first White Paper that said, "national health service".

**Bill Grant:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was being extremely kind today to my colleagues in the Labour party. The war prevented the launch at that time, but the general principle and the welcoming of a national health service has been good for the United Kingdom.

Finally, a line from a Robert Burns poem that was penned more than two centuries ago in 1780. It is four verses long but I will recite only one line. It is called, "Here's to Thy Health", and it reads as follows:

"I'll count my health my greatest wealth  
Sae lang as I'll enjoy it".

9.47 am

**Hugh Gaffney** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Hosie. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing this debate.

If we look back over almost a century, so much change has happened and so many developments have taken place, but one thing has remained constant: our world-leading, history-making and much loved national health service. Let us think about the founding principles of the national health service. It is comprehensive, universal and free at the point of delivery; millions of lives have been saved and millions of people treated and restored to good health; and it has tens of thousands of decent, hard-working and much-loved public sector workers.

As we approach the 70th birthday of the national health service, to those workers I say thank you for your compassion and sacrifices, for always going the extra mile and for standing firm in the wake of the millions of Tory cuts that we have seen since 2010 and the Scottish National party cuts in Holyrood since 2007. Decisions taken by politicians of all political parties have had an impact on our national health service. I was proud of the previous Labour Government's record investment in our NHS. We delivered lower waiting times, faster operation times, a GP in local communities and vital investment in infrastructure and facilities. Sadly, it is not all good, and we cannot take our NHS, its workers or its mission for granted.

My local hospital, Monklands, serves many of my constituents in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill. It is one of the busiest hospitals, and just a few months ago there were reports that it needed more than £30 million worth of repairs. There are leaks, and wards are closing. We will look at Monklands hospital. Sadly, on a personal note, one day when I was in Parliament my mother, who is 85 and has dementia, was sent home from Wishaw hospital in a taxi after waiting two hours, with no food and no toilet facilities. My father is 88 years old. They both saw the NHS born. They have been taxpayers all their lives. My father cannot understand why his wife, at her age and with her illness, was treated that way. All that in the 21st century. Thankfully, my mother is now back at her care home, and has settled down a little bit.

Sadly, thanks to the Scottish Government's failure to invest, more than £3 million was spent on agency staff—that would have paid for more than 100 nurses. Across Lanarkshire in the year 2016-17, more than £10 million was spent on agency staff in three hospitals: Wishaw,

[Hugh Gaffney]

Monklands and Hairmyres. To quote the leader of the Scottish Labour party—my leader—Richard Leonard, we need to stop these private companies

“sucking money out of the NHS”.

I do not want to sound too negative. I am proud of the NHS, and I am proud of its workers. I will work with anyone and everyone who wants to see it funded, supported, protected, defended and enhanced. That is why I am here: to defend and fight for public services, to champion public sector workers, and to fight for the right to a hospital bed, an appointment with a GP and an operation in good time.

As Bevan said in 1948, the national health service must meet everyone’s needs, be free at the point of delivery, and be based on clinical need, not the ability to pay. That is our mission; that is my focus. As we come together to acknowledge and celebrate the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the national health service, we must recommit ourselves to delivering that noble aim and objective. Happy birthday, NHS.

9.51 am

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. Let me begin by reassuring the Minister that I am not going to give a list of all my medical complaints—I seem to have a tendency to do that at these debates. I will just say that they are very few in number. As one of the officers for the all-party parliamentary group for diabetes, I agree with what the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) said about diabetes, and the way we need to tackle it by fighting obesity and waiting for the effects of that to come through.

If there were one birthday present that I would like to give the NHS, the Prime Minister has already given it: a long-term plan for the NHS and a multi-year funding settlement in support of it. That is very important for a number of reasons. We all know that the NHS has suffered its most challenging winter for many years. We also know, as Opposition Members have pointed out, that we are living in an ageing society. By 2020, there will be more 70-year-olds than there were five years earlier. I am not sure whether my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) and I will be in that category—I have not done the maths yet—but we will go there jointly and with good humour, I am sure. The number of over-85s will nearly double by 2035. We have to focus our services on dealing with the requirements of that group of people, who are living in a modern age where the NHS has introduced many improvements over the past few years.

For the NHS to plan and manage budgets effectively in the long term we need to move away from annual top-ups of its budget, and towards a sustainable long-term plan. Whatever plan we introduce, it has to be sustainable. We have the five year forward view as a basis on which to work towards that. I was very pleased that the Prime Minister announced to the Liaison Committee that the Government would introduce a long-term plan for the NHS and, most importantly, do so in conjunction with the leaders of the NHS, clinicians and health experts. We cannot introduce that long-term plan simply as politicians. I look forward to that with a great deal of anticipation.

We all know that care is not properly integrated—we have seen that in our constituencies—and we all know that we need to integrate health and social care more quickly than we can really manage. I fully support that process. All those things came up at a public meeting in my constituency just a few days ago. Somebody asked why we still fund the NHS on an annual basis, and I was able to point out that we are moving away from that system.

I will finish with this point: putting public health at the heart of what we are doing with the NHS is crucial. We cannot stand here and speak about the future of the NHS unless we put public health at the centre of everything we do. I recommend that course of action to the Minister.

9.56 am

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Hosie, for chairing this morning’s important debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for introducing it in the way that he did.

The incredible tributes that we have heard this past week to Dame Tessa Jowell have reminded us what a formidable politician she was, and how she centred her work around the important agenda of public health, backed up by the epidemiological evidence. We have had so many fantastic evidence-based reports, not least the work done by Michael Marmot in identifying the importance of the social determinants of our health outcomes. We know that various agendas meet around public health—social, economic, health and education agendas, and many more. That is why it is really important that we put our focus on the whole person and the impact that life has on people.

We have seen severe cuts, not least to our Sure Start centres, hundreds of which have closed. From the evidence that they produce, we know about the real impact that they have, particularly on our young people. Health visitors are an initiative that the Government took up in 2010, following Labour’s urging that we must increase the number of health visitors. That number has now fallen, from the 4,200 additional health visitors that David Cameron put right at the heart of his Government, back to the numbers before that Government. There is a real crisis among that vital workforce, with ever-increasing workloads.

We have had workforce cuts, financial cuts and service cuts in public health. Public health is about long-term outcomes, and when we are dealing with austerity and cuts, we are looking at having to support tomorrow, not the future. Public health has been a very poor relative in the austerity programme, and I can witness that in my city. In Acomb in York, since 2011 I have seen childhood obesity more than double among my community. I have also seen health checks cut; those are vital at the age of 40 to ensure that we put people’s health back on track.

Long-term contraception has been cut, and smoking cessation services demolished—unless, of course, people pay for them. We have seen a 90% fall in the number of people able to access smoking cessation services, in an area where the number of people who smoke is higher than the national average. Those are the real consequences of cuts. In York, the clinical commissioning group denies surgery to people who have a high body mass index or who smoke, yet the support services to help

people change their lifestyle and behaviours are not there any more—a complete nonsense. That is why it is really important to put the focus back on public health.

Over the past week, I was most shocked by a letter I received about substance misuse services in York. York is now 148th out of 148 authorities when it comes to drug-related deaths of people in treatment and across the community as a whole. Most people will be shocked to hear that about York, but when I look at what our local council have done in absolutely slashing funding to those vital services, I am not really surprised—and, of course, the most severe cuts are still to come. What will that mean to the people in my community whose life chances are being taken away from them?

Across mental health services, the sustained lack of investment over such a long period is having a real impact on health outcomes. People have been hurt by cuts and hurt by political decisions. It need not be that way. We all know it is the most vulnerable, the poorest, the people who really need the state's help who fall down when the state stands back.

We have heard so much about young people in the debate, for whom interventions are even lower than for older people. For people in their latter years, public health virtually does not feature. Yet, in the health service that Bevan created, everyone from cradle to grave could access the necessary good public health services. Such interventions save the NHS so much money—it is a no-brainer—so why cut those services? That question comes not just from me, but from directors of public health I meet regularly in my constituency, and across the board. They want to understand what will happen when the public health grant is withdrawn. I hope the Minister can reassure them today that he will ensure that they will receive the funding needed to sustain services into the future. They also want to know how the Department of Health and Social Care will work with directors of public health to ensure that their long-term goals for improving the community's public health will be funded.

We need to look seriously at the workforce in public health, which has been decimated. We have to look at funding to sustain that for the future health of our nation. We need to look at outcomes, not just inputs. Let me take the child measurement programme as an example. It is a nonsense that we know now how obese children are, but we cannot afford the interventions to change the trajectory of those children's lives. That means that the programme does not work. We need to examine how we change the life chances of so many people across the country.

I want to touch on the 70th birthday of the NHS, which is so important for so many of us, and draw the Minister's attention to what we are doing in York. When I heard what his Department was rolling out, I thought it quite lacklustre—it lacked ambition—so I pulled together the health leaders in York to drive forward a public health initiative to mark the 70th birthday. It includes the clinical commissioning group, the acute trust, the mental health trust and the local authority. We are working together to launch in July, as part of that fantastic celebration, a whole programme intended to transform the health of our whole community.

I have a meeting with businesses to talk about how employers can change the life chances of people who work for them. We are meeting faith and community

groups to talk to them about people that they engage with. We are going to have a touring pop-up event across the city over the NHS birthday to provide advice, health checks and services, and simple programmes, because we do not have a lot of money. I know from Health questions that the Minister will meet with me, as the Secretary of State said, to talk about this initiative. We are going to have health walks at lunchtimes. We are going to have basic tests to understand health measures, as well as advice, information, encouragement and the promotion of better understanding, looking at diet, exercise, behaviour and the choices that people made. We are determined to touch the thousands of lives of people in York on this 70th birthday, because we want to celebrate the future with everyone.

We know that so many people are being failed, and the most vulnerable are being failed the most, but we can change things around. Public health does not actually cost a lot of money compared with acute services. So, I trust that from today, we will take the spirit of Nye Bevan and ensure that we invest in the very people who will depend on our NHS in the future.

10.4 am

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing this important debate. I wish the NHS a very happy birthday. I cannot understand—I get angry—when I hear politicians on the other side of the Atlantic rubbish the NHS as a service. It is one of the greatest achievements of this country and, as has been said, credit is due to Clement Attlee's Government for doing what they did.

Being born when I was, and being brought up in the Highlands, as a child I was part of the nascent NHS service. My late father told me what it was like before I was born. He spoke of the inequalities—how, if someone did not have enough money, their life would be shorter, because they could not pay for the doctor. That is how unfair it was. The NHS is about fairness, and that is why it is such a great achievement for this country.

I extol the virtues of the staff. Through my wife's illness, I know how dedicated the neurosurgery team in Aberdeen Royal Infirmary is, and how fantastic the nurses were at a critical time in my wife's life. She recovered, thank God. If there are angels on this earth, they wear nurses' and doctors' uniforms, believe you me.

The issue for Scottish Members is that the NHS is of course devolved, but I want to touch on something I mentioned in the summer when I questioned the Prime Minister. Within my vast and scattered constituency, we face really big challenges owing to remoteness and distance. There was a story in the national press recently about a mother who lived in Wick who had to make a 520-mile round trip to Livingston to give birth. That was due to an accidental coincidence of unavailability of services more locally. I do not want to give the staff a hard time—staff morale is crucial—and, for the record, I am not getting at the staff, but the fact that it happened should worry us all.

What we see in remote parts of Scotland, including my own constituency, is that there seems to be an impression that our network of local hospitals is not

[*Jamie Stone*]

being used to the maximum it could be, in terms of treating people locally. I believe it is an issue of funding, which other hon. Members have also highlighted. What bothers me about what I think is happening in my constituency is that it seems to be taking us rather worryingly near to the sort of inequalities that my father spoke of. In other words, a person who lives in a very remote area of Caithness or Sutherland might not get the same deal as someone who lives in Glasgow, Edinburgh or Aberdeen, because it is harder to access services. That is the challenge for the Scottish Government, and for us all. Surely to goodness a person should not be disadvantaged because of where they live. That is what lay behind the Beveridge report, which in a way was influential on Nye Bevan bringing into being the NHS: the idea that no matter who someone was, or where they lived, they had an equal right to the service.

I do not know the answer. Health is devolved to Scotland, which I accept. It is rightly the property of Members of the Scottish Parliament and Ministers in the Scottish Government, who I am sure do their level best, but if there is a perception in Westminster that one part of the UK—it may be Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland—is perhaps not functioning quite as it should, and on something as fundamental to our lives as the NHS, at the very least there has to be a conversation between UK Ministers and Scottish Government Ministers to say, “Is it going okay for you? Is there something we could do better? Is there something that can be co-ordinated better throughout the UK to make sure that whether someone lives in Scotland, Wales, England or Northern Ireland, they have the same access to health services?”

I give notice that this is an issue to which I will return, while of course always recognising the difficulty of the fact that health is a devolved matter and there are therefore limits on what I can say. I do not intend to be silent on the issue.

10.9 am

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) said, the antecedents of the NHS are to be found in Tredegar and in the Beveridge report, which preceded it. Disease was one of Beveridge’s five great evils. Infectious diseases such as polio, diphtheria and tuberculosis caused people to die in their early and mid-50s on average. The need for a sufficient and healthy labour force to rebuild the economy necessitated combating those diseases, which also caused a high rate of infant mortality. The need for a better, longer-living workforce drove much of what Beveridge looked at.

There was in fact a good deal of state funding provision before 1948 to cope with the devastation of disease, but what Bevan did, against tremendous opposition within the service and politically, was to centralise the system, nationalise hospital provision, create standards across the country and, crucially, give people the assurance that they would always be seen and treated, based on their need, not their ability to pay.

The health service was built on a tripartite structure of hospital, GP and community services. In return for good terms and conditions, clinical freedom and autonomy in the system, the doctors finally agreed and the NHS

was born. It was a wonderful achievement, but it was also a wonderful compromise. Over the past 70 years, the tensions in that compromise—the local versus the national, the role of clinical autonomy, priorities and the quality of the service—have regularly surfaced. There are always crises—astonishingly, every year there is a winter.

We now treat 1 million people every 36 hours, and employ nearly 2 million people. We are very grateful for everything they do, and we celebrate them today on this 70th year. However, the challenges are different today, and the service should therefore be different in the next 70 years. This anniversary is an opportunity to celebrate the achievement, revisit the compromise and set a course that is as resilient for the next 70 years. The diseases that are with us today—cancer, and cardiovascular, respiratory and liver disease—are very different. Depending on a person’s social class, dietary risks, tobacco and obesity are the biggest contributors to early death and disability. Alcohol and drug misuse, and lack of physical activity, are also key. We are finally starting to appreciate the impact of mental health and social isolation on physical health.

Life expectancy has increased, but the prevalence of people living with one or more limiting long-term illnesses has changed the picture of healthcare demand, and that requires the system to change. In Bristol, women live an average of 64 years in good health, but a further 19 years in poor health. For men, the figures are 63 and 15 years, but that average masks a huge range in social class. Several areas of my Bristol South constituency are in the bottom 5% in England for male life expectancy. In 2010 the Marmot review told us that such health inequalities cost us approximately £36 billion to £40 billion in lost taxes and costs in welfare and to the NHS—that is a huge amount of money. We must prevent and manage life-limiting diseases and address the silent misery of families who support and cope with people living with them.

Accountability is a major issue for the service in the next 70 years. We need to start treating patients and the public as assets to the health service, not as nuisances. We need somehow to introduce democratic accountability into decision making. The complex fragmentation of the health service makes it wholly unclear where responsibility, and hence accountability, lies. From the bottom up, hundreds of bodies are involved. The 200-odd clinical commissioning groups are members’ clubs with no element of either direct or representative democracy, and they are plagued with conflicts of interest. At the top, there is not just the Department and Ministers, but a raft of arm’s length bodies, which Members of Parliament find it impossible to navigate. I worked in the system for a CCG, and I still find it really difficult—it is an absolute mess.

One reason for the mess is the disaster of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, but the NHS has been poor on accountability since the early centralisation. It has always been fragmented in a way that makes accountability harder, and it has always seen itself as separate from the rest of the local system, which has democratic accountability. That is a problem. It has always been riven by powerful vested interests that distort the general accountability. That is a key part of Bevan’s compromise, and I think we need to revisit it.

Presented with a well-made case that is supported by, dare I say it, experts or informed leaders, the public will make difficult decisions. I know local politics can make things difficult when tough issues such as service changes are necessary, but excluding people does not make that any easier. Making a hard case to local people and their MPs is challenging work, but if that does not happen decisions gain no legitimacy. We can keep the “N” in the NHS, but we need to give local people far more control to make it more resilient for the next 70 years.

It looks like we are going that way. We have heard about the experience in Scotland, and this is also a devolved matter in Wales. Very interesting things are happening in Manchester, but we need a much better debate about what local looks like. We must recognise that the key issues for now are the money and the workforce. Technology gives us huge opportunities, including on some of the workforce issues.

I want to finish by talking about leadership. I joined the health service as a manager in the late 1980s, and I am very proud of the role that managers play in the services. General management, which was introduced in the 1980s, has few friends, partly because it was associated with the Thatcher era of reforms, and partly because it threatens clinical autonomy and freedom, which were fundamental to Bevan’s compromise. We should use this anniversary to celebrate managers and leadership in the NHS. We need good clinical and non-clinical managers to make the changes we want to see, deliver the efficiencies we need and keep making the system safer. I hope that they can also help leaders make the NHS more open and accountable. We need that for the next 70 years.

10.16 am

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a sincere and genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing this debate and for his thorough and measured speech. He talked about the challenges we face in the NHS, about austerity—obviously, across these isles, we all face the challenge of dealing with austerity constraints—and about obesity. I mentioned earlier that on Monday, Jamie Oliver met the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, here in London. He backed the Scottish Government’s target to halve childhood obesity rates by 2030 with a new healthy weight and diet plan, which is due to be published this summer. It will include action to restrict promotions that advertise junk food, including multi-buy deals on unhealthy products.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the fantastic parkrun, which is one of the best lifestyle movements—if you will pardon the pun, Mr Hosie—that we have. It is free, run by volunteers and accessible. It is 5 km—anyone of any ability can manage that. This morning, I managed to get some miles in the bank before this debate, alongside my Scottish National party running club colleagues. The hon. Gentleman is more than welcome to join us any time he wishes. The invitation is open to all: we are ecumenical.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) gave us a very good history lesson about how far the NHS has come. He was very comradely in his cross-party acknowledgment that Labour founded the NHS, and rightly so. In his comradeliness, he neglected to mention any of the NHS measures in Scotland,

which are no doubt helped in no small part by the intervention and support of his daughters. It is right that we pay tribute to NHS workers. The NHS in Scotland is the best performing in the UK.

My constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), perhaps missed the tone a wee bit, but I understand his anxiety. He talked about Monklands Hospital, which is in my constituency. Of course, the SNP Scottish Government have committed funding to build a new Monklands Hospital. We are all aware of the challenges previous Scottish Governments faced with the accident and emergency service at Monklands Hospital. There was potential for a downgrade, but the hospital’s future is secure and we are going to get a new service. The hon. Gentleman talked about funding, and of course the NHS in Scotland is supported by record funding levels. However, the hon. Gentleman is right that, like all NHS services, we are not without our challenges in Scotland. In that regard, I hope that he pursues the case that he mentioned, involving his mother. It is right that where there are problems they are called out and we learn from them.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) talked about the need for a long-term plan for the NHS. We all agree with that. He also talked about care not being properly integrated, but in Scotland we have legislated to integrate health and social care, so we are further down the road to seeing it realised. He was right to mention that public health must be central—we must all remember that, and remind ourselves of it.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was right to pay tribute to Dame Tessa Jowell, who personified dignity, passion and eruditeness in her final months of campaigning on health issues. We all pay tribute to her work and pass on our sincere condolences to her family.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) gave a very measured speech based on experience and personal testimony. He is right that the NHS is fundamentally about fairness, and he was right to pay tribute to our NHS staff, as we should all do—it should be something to unify us all. He talked about rurality and distance, and I benefit from experience in that regard because I am originally from Orkney, so I well appreciate the challenges of local service delivery, which are not too dissimilar from the ones that he faces in his constituency. I know, however, that the Scottish Government are aware of that and that the door is open to him should he seek to make representations or come up with ideas.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke about the potential for UK conversations, but as I have said, the Scottish health service is performing well according to any number of measures. The issues and conversations that we are having are about funding, and about breaking the austerity stranglehold that affects all our local public services. Perhaps he will join us in continuing to challenge UK Ministers to end austerity.

The hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), too, gave a very good speech based on experience. She spoke about the new challenges that we face and how they have changed over time. She mentioned obesity, as I have, and alcohol abuse. The Scottish Government have intervened to legislate for and bring in, after much challenge, a minimum unit price for alcohol in Scotland.

[Neil Gray]

UK Ministers are following developments to see how progress is made. When discussing NHS staff, it is right to mention frontline staff—our nurses and doctors—but we should also mention the decision makers, leaders and management level. I have a good working relationship with my local decision makers and managers, and the hon. Lady was right to mention them.

I want to touch a wee bit on my personal experience of the NHS. In many ways, it has shaped where I am, and I am personally indebted to it. First, when I was a young boy, not that much older than my son is now, I pulled a kettle of boiling water down on myself. The scars are still there on my arm and chest, a physical reminder of what happened. Had it not been for swift and expert intervention at the time I would not have the full use of my right arm, so I am personally indebted to the staff in Kirkwall and Aberdeen for what they did for me.

Those who know me and my slightly accident-prone nature will be surprised to learn that my next major intervention from the NHS was not for 20 years, when I dislocated my knee running on a running track, ending what little there was of my athletics career. However, it could have been far worse. Had it not been for the swift intervention of the surgeon at Ninewells Hospital, John Dearing, who operated within the week, because of the nerve damage I sustained when I dislocated my knee I would not have the full range of mobility in my legs that I have now. As I have said, I can still run, and play football and rugby equally badly, but I would not have been able to had it not been for his swift and timely intervention, so I am very grateful.

I am sure that many of us in the House are indebted to the NHS in one area that we have not really talked about, other than the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. I am certainly grateful to the NHS for the wonderful experience of the birth of my two children. Sometimes we take such services for granted, in particular when we hear about the experience of friends in America, for example. Anecdotally, if we make an analogy with the recent delivery of the royal baby in the Lindo wing, American patients could travel first-class the whole way to the Lindo wing for the same price that it would cost to have their baby delivered in America. We should all remind ourselves of how fortunate we are in many regards in this country.

I know that we do not all have positive experiences when we interact with the NHS. I deal with complaints about the NHS, just as any MP, any Member of the Scottish Parliament up the road, or any colleagues of the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent in Wales do. However, as I mull over developments in my area, such as the new Monklands Hospital, and the medical advances that have been made over the past 70 years, we should be incredibly proud of our NHS and protect its integrity with every political and moral fibre available to us. I thank all those who work in our NHS, past and present, in Scotland and across these isles, and I wish the institution that we are so proud of a very happy 70th birthday.

10.26 am

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Mr Hosie, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning in this very important debate.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing the debate and for his excellent speech. He is rightly proud of his roots in his wonderful constituency and the connection that it holds with Nye Bevan and the founding of the NHS. I am sure that he and his constituents will enjoy the 70th anniversary celebrations, and I look forward to hearing all about them.

I would also like to thank the other hon. Members who spoke this morning for their thoughtful contributions to the debate—the hon. Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), for Henley (John Howell), for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who speaks for the Scottish National party, and my hon. Friends the Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Bristol South (Karin Smyth).

This is the first speech that I am giving on the 70th birthday celebrations of the NHS, and it is a genuine honour and privilege to be able to do so here today as the shadow Minister for public health. On 5 July, 70 years ago, the Health Secretary, Aneurin Bevan, was handed the keys to Park Hospital in Manchester, now known as Trafford General Hospital, and launched our national health service. I have my own little photocopied memento of a leaflet distributed before that launch—I wish I had a better copy, but I treasure this one. It says:

“Your new National Health Service begins on 5th July. What is it? How do you get it?”

It will provide you with all medical, dental, and nursing care. Everyone—rich or poor, man, woman or child—can use it or any part of it.”

It went on to say:

“But it is not a ‘charity’. You are all paying for it, mainly as taxpayers, and it will relieve your money worries in time of illness.”

The crux of it for our citizens was that they would no longer have to make that awful decision—the choice between debt or, in some unfortunate cases, death. Everyone would now receive healthcare publicly provided and free at the point of use.

I have got my own family anecdote which, as we have the time, I am going to share with you all this morning. I am sure we have all got these family anecdotes. Mine involves my Auntie Ella and my mam. My Auntie Ella was born before the start of world war two and my mam was born in 1945—so you can see straightaway that there is going to be a great anecdote here.

Now, I do not know why—they must just have been unlucky—but in both of their childhoods they suffered from pneumonia. Pre the NHS, when it was my Auntie Ella who had pneumonia, my nana had to go to the doctor’s surgery every morning, where he would hold out his hand, and into his hand she would place a coin—a shilling or whatever. Then she would hold out her hand and into her hand he would place a tablet—obviously, penicillin or some form of medicine. Then she would go home and give it to my Auntie Ella. This went on nearly a week.

My nana was very poor, working class, and she says that in those days, in order to get the money to get that tablet, she would pay a visit to the pawn shop on her way, and pawn whatever was valuable to her at that moment. It tended to be sheets, or a son’s suit or her husband’s suit. She did that in order to get the tablet.

Now fast forward to when my mam, who was born in '45, got pneumonia, after the health service came in in '48. My nana did not have to pawn anything; she did not have to go to the doctor's surgery at all, because a district nurse knocked on the door every day and went upstairs to where my mam was lying in bed with pneumonia, gave her an injection and left. No pawning of sheets, no handing over of money, no stress—that was the difference. Therefore, all of us—I do believe that it is all of us—are committed to those founding principles. We on the Opposition side of the House especially, will continue to fight against the privatisation of our NHS for those reasons.

To quote a phrase often falsely attributed, I now understand, to Bevan, but one I repeat because it rings true no matter who said it:

“The NHS will last as long as there are folk with the faith to fight for it.”

I am pleased to say that 70 years on, there are still plenty of people with the faith left to fight for it. I hope that we will all—though maybe not us personally—be celebrating our NHS for 70 years more, and 70 years after that, and so on. It changed the lives of people then and it is still changing the lives of people today.

Bevan had huge ambitions, but he never would have imagined all those years ago the successes we have had in medicine because of the development of the NHS. I will talk about a few of them now. In 1952, Francis Crick, a British scientist, and James Watson, an American student, made one of the most important scientific breakthroughs of the 20th century, when they discovered the molecular structure of DNA. The discovery helped revolutionise medical treatments in the NHS and elsewhere, improving prevention and treatment of disease. For example, we know now that a BRCA gene mutation can cause a number of cancers in both men and women, who now have the option to have preventive surgery in order to reduce their risk of developing cancer.

In 1954, Sir Richard Doll, a British scientist, published a study in *The British Medical Journal* co-written with Sir Austin Bradford Hill, which established the link between smoking and lung cancer. That very important study has since led to increased smoking cessation policies from successive Governments, including the ban on smoking in public spaces by the Labour Government in 2006 and the current Government's—and the Minister's—tobacco control plan. Smoking prevalence is decreasing across the country, and I am pleased to say that smoking rates in the north-east are declining faster than the national average, thanks in no small part to support from programmes such as Fresh North East, which has seen around 165,000 people quit smoking since 2005.

In 1958, vaccinations for polio and diphtheria were launched, to reduce deaths from both diseases. I am pleased to say both those terrible diseases have now been eradicated from the UK. Others, such as TB and MMR vaccinations, have now become a key part of NHS prevention work. We were in this Chamber just two weeks ago debating the extension of the HPV vaccination to boys after its successful roll-out to girls in order to prevent cancers caused by that virus. Bevan could never have imagined such developments—or maybe he did, such was his vision.

In 1960, doctors at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh completed the UK's first kidney transplant, using a set of 49-year-old twins. Incidentally—perhaps it was the

pneumonia—my Aunty Ella, who I have mentioned once already, went on to have kidney failure; and just a decade after the first transplant in Edinburgh, she became one of the first to receive a kidney transplant in Newcastle Freeman Hospital. That helped her live long enough not only to see her own children grow up, but to see her first grandchildren born. In 1968, a team of 18 doctors and nurses at the National Heart Hospital in London, led by surgeon Donald Ross, carried out the first heart transplant in this country. There are now more than 50,000 people living with a functioning transplant thanks to organ donation and transplantation in the UK, giving them more time to spend and treasure with their families.

In 1988, breast cancer screening was introduced, offering mammograms to women over 50. We have now increased the number of women who are eligible for breast screening. That helps with early diagnosis and survival rates, which are now at 78% for 10 years or more—excellent figures. None of this would have happened if it were not for our NHS and the everyday heroes that work within it. The NHS is the UK's largest employer, with over 1.5 million staff from all over the world and more than 350 different careers. Those people are kind, caring and passionate about their patients. They just want to get on and do their job, but sadly, they are finding this more and more difficult, with funding cuts and thousands of unfilled vacancies, when more and more is expected of them.

We on the Opposition side of the House do not take our NHS or the workforce for granted, and neither should the Government. It has to be said that for the last eight years, the NHS has been in crisis. We have ever-growing waiting lists, patients waiting on trolleys in overcrowded hospitals, and people being told not to go to A&E unless it is an absolute emergency. Earlier this year, the Prime Minister announced a funding plan to mark the 70th anniversary of the NHS. I hope the Minister will inform the House how much of that funding will go to improving and establishing public health services. There is a huge funding gap within the NHS, but with the right public health services we can help people to live healthier lives and support them in their endeavour to do so, which, in turn, will save money.

It is estimated by the King's Fund that since local authorities became responsible for public health budgets in 2015, on a like-for-like basis, public health spending has fallen by 5.2%. That follows a £200 million in-year cut to public health spending in 2015-16 and there are further real-term cuts to come, averaging 3.9% each year between 2016-17 and 2020-21. On the ground, that means cuts to spending on tackling drug misuse in adults—cut by more than £22 million compared with just last year—and smoking cessation services—cut by almost £16 million. Spending to tackle obesity has also fallen, by 18.5% between 2015-16 and 2016-17, again with further cuts in the pipeline in the years to come. These are vital services for local communities, which would benefit their health and life expectancy, but sadly, they continue to be cut due to lack of funding.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent said in his excellent opening speech, an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure—a line that I will certainly be stealing for future speeches—and that is why, 70 years on, we must focus on public health initiatives.

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

That is why I am so pleased that he made today's debate about public health, rather than its just being on the 70th anniversary generally. Not only can such initiatives help people live healthier lives, but they will save the NHS—and, in turn, the Treasury—money. I think the technical term for that is a no-brainer.

In closing, I will return to Bevan's wise words. He said:

“No society can legitimately call itself civilised if a sick person is denied medical aid because of lack of means.”

This Government have the means to make people in this country some of the healthiest in the world. I hope that they will take those means and ensure that vital public health services are provided to society to do just that.

**Karin Smyth:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, as usual. Does she agree that one of the issues with devolution, and some of the experimentation we have seen, is the separation of knowledge between the health service and providers of our public services, particularly in England? We can learn from the experience that has been gained, particularly in Wales, where there is much more integration between those areas, and transfer the learning about public health that has come into local authorities, so that they understand the need to work better with local health services.

**Mrs Hodgson:** Absolutely. That point had not been covered, so I am pleased that my hon. Friend has made it. There is best practice in Wales, and even in Scotland—we are always hearing in these debates about some of the wonderful things going on in Scotland, aren't we, Minister? We should learn from where there is best practice. Where good things are happening, that knowledge should be spread across the NHS, especially if it will lead to better public health and, in turn, save money.

I was just coming to the end of my contribution. I just wanted to say that we want to go on to see more successes, such as the ones I listed earlier, over the next 70 years. I am sure we will. With medical technology and science the way they are, we probably cannot even imagine the sorts of advances that we will see. I hope those will all be within the publicly funded national health service that we are all so proud of, for many years to come.

10.41 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine):** What an interesting debate. I echo the view of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), that it is a privilege to be in this position at this time in the NHS's history. I feel like I know her Auntie Ella personally—what a lovely family anecdote that was. That real example was a good reminder of what the NHS has brought to families.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) on securing the debate. Those who know me know that I certainly share his passion for this topic. Winchester cannot claim ownership of Mr Bevan, but Florence Nightingale established a hospital in my city on the hill—the Royal Hampshire County Hospital, which is much loved and is still there doing great things. It has very committed and caring staff. The hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) said that the NHS was

a great achievement but that there were also a number of compromises. If I may say so, she was very astute to put it that way. As many Members have said, we live with that achievement but there are many compromises.

The NHS is of course 70 years old this year. Much has changed in our society and our health since 1948. Our health needs are very different, and we have better drugs and diagnostic tools. When the NHS was born, life expectancy was 66 for men and 71 for women; today it is 79 and 83 respectively. That is incredible. In 1948 there were more than 34 deaths for every 1,000 live births; today there are just five, although that is still too many.

I will start where every Health Minister should, by thanking our NHS staff for all they do, day in, day out, to make our NHS something that we are incredibly proud of. There was a great awards event this week in London, at which the Duke of Cambridge spoke, which showcased so many wonderful examples. Indeed, Mr Bevan would be amazed at the work that goes on today across the NHS.

We want to use the NHS70 moment to reflect on the last 70 years of patient care, to celebrate the innovations in the NHS, to raise awareness of the many ways we can support the system and, probably most importantly, to promote the public's role in the future of the NHS and the importance of taking care of our own health and using the NHS wisely—and, yes, accountability, which the hon. Member for Bristol South wisely raised. I am giving her a lot of credit. [Interruption.] “Keep going,” she says.

So much of this debate is about our changing society, but the NHS has consistently been a universal service that is free at the point of need. That will continue. However, as several Members said, we are facing many different challenges from those we faced back in the '40s, such as the prevalence of type 2 diabetes, which my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned. He sits on the all-party parliamentary group on diabetes. I was bitterly disappointed that he did not give us any of his medical updates, but I know that those will come another time. In fact, we heard a couple of medical examples from the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray). The rising prevalence of type 2 diabetes is a great challenge for us, as is cancer. Both can be reduced if we tackle obesity and encourage more people to lead healthier lifestyles, so that is where I will focus.

The Government take the public health challenge we face incredibly seriously. We have responded by putting prevention at the heart of public policy making. We have taken quite stringent steps. As the shadow Minister said, we are a global leader on tobacco control. We were the first country in Europe to introduce legislation to bring in plain packaging for cigarettes, off the back of the smoking ban in public places. She rightly mentioned Fresh North East, which is a very good example—it is in many ways the apple of my eye in this policy area. I hope at some point, if the arithmetic in this place ever allows, to go and see it for myself. I will let her know if I do—perhaps we can do that together. In April we introduced the soft drinks industry levy, which is a big public health measure. In recent years we have vaccinated more than 1 million infants against meningitis and an additional 2 million children against flu.

We have run award-winning public health campaigns, including Be Clear on Cancer, which I am very invested in, and Act FAST, the public health stroke campaign. They all sit with the inheritance of the landmark Don't Die of Ignorance campaign about the AIDS challenge we faced in the late 1980s—I am surprised that was not mentioned. That campaign still makes the hair on the back of the neck stand up, does it not? It was an incredibly impactful and powerful piece of work that came out of the public health movement.

I want to cover a lot of things, but let me return to diabetes, which is a major challenge. Preventing diabetes is a huge priority for the Government. According to Diabetes UK, which I saw just last week, about 5 million people in our country are currently at high risk of developing type 2 diabetes. If the current trend persists, one in three people will be obese by 2034 and one in 10 will develop type 2 diabetes. Some of the risk factors for type 2 diabetes, such as poor diet and a sedentary lifestyle, which can lead to obesity, can be changed. We know that 61.4% of adults are either overweight or obese; and 26% of adults and 20% of children aged 10 to 11 are obese. The obesity crisis has been decades in the making, and tackling it is a real challenge. It will not be turned around overnight, and no one pretends that it can be. That is why tackling obesity is absolutely a Government priority. I will come back to that point in a moment.

I mentioned the NHS diabetes prevention programme, which is aimed at providing people aged 40 to 60 who are at risk of diabetes with personalised help with healthy eating and lifestyle, and bespoke physical activity. So far, as I said at Health questions last week, more than 170,000 people have been referred to that programme. Those who are referred get tailored, personalised help, and that is really making an impact.

**Neil Gray:** It was remiss of me when talking about childhood obesity and lifestyle changes not to commend those who started and spread the daily mile challenge in our schools. Perhaps the Minister will touch on that, and on its roots in Scotland.

**Steve Brine:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. I touched on child obesity, which is one of the top public health challenges, if not the top challenge, for this generation. Overweight and obesity-related ill health is estimated to cost the NHS in England about £5.1 billion each year. The estimated total cost to society is between £27 billion and £46 billion per year. Our child obesity plan, which was published back in 2016, is informed by the latest evidence and research in the area. At its heart is a desire to change the nature of the food that children eat and make it easier for families to make healthier choices. Since we published the plan, real progress has been made on sugar production. Since the introduction of the soft drinks industry levy, which I mentioned, sugar has been drastically reduced in around half of all soft drinks products that fall under the levy. I recognise the daily mile, which was rightly raised by the hon. Gentleman, which he said started in Scotland. It is in England as well, though not as much as I would like to see it—we have an ambition for it to do much better.

Many Members mentioned child obesity, and we have always been clear that the child obesity strategy is the start of a conversation and not the final word—we

call it chapter 1 for a reason. We continue to monitor the progress we have made since the publication of the strategy a couple of years ago, and if further measures are needed we will take them.

Let me touch on physical activity, which the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent rightly spoke about. People know that being active is good for their health and they want to do more, but the truth is that many of us are simply not active enough to benefit our health. Only 66% of men and 58% of women in England meet the chief medical officer's recommendation to be active for at least 150 minutes a week. Children are no better, with only 23% of boys and 20% of girls being active for at least 60 minutes a day. As we get older, we become less active. It is recommended that we do muscle strengthening and balance exercises on at least two days a week, but the most recent health survey shows that only 1% of the adult population in England meet that guideline.

Why is that important? We are facing an ageing population and there is good evidence that being active reduces the chance of falls, depression and dementia by up to 30%. That will help people stay healthy and independent for longer, and we need that to happen if the NHS is to be sustainable for its next 70 years. People need to understand why being active is important and have a clear understanding of how much activity they should do and the impact that can have on their health. I was pleased to hear parkruns mentioned by a number of Members, including the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent, because they are incredibly important. I have them in my constituency at the River Park leisure centre.

It is vital that we acknowledge the importance of good mental health, which was mentioned a couple of times in the debate. Everybody's mental health is on a point on the spectrum and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) said, mental health is just the other side of the coin of physical health. Good mental health is so important to leading positive and productive lives and to the NHS. This is Mental Health Awareness Week, but really every day should be a mental health awareness day. Mental health is a key priority for the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, which is why last December we published the Green Paper on children and young people's mental health, backed by more than £300 million of funding to improve access to services and, crucially, mental health support in schools.

Just yesterday I was at the Maudsley Hospital in London, looking at the incredible work it has done in bringing us to a smoke-free NHS. We identified mental health in-patients as a key target in the tobacco control plan. I saw the important work being done, which I would recommend to any Members who think they could inspire their local areas to follow that lead.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock was dead right to mention delayed transfers of care—delayed discharges—which are a key component and in many ways the magic key to the NHS. It is also always nice to hear Robert Burns quoted in the Chamber, but I am sorry that he did not sing it—maybe next time.

I understand why the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) made the speech he did. He certainly put down a marker for the Scottish Government, who govern his constituents.

[Steve Brine]

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley for mentioning the long-term economic plan—I have not said that for a while—and the multi-year funding plan that the Prime Minister talked about at the Liaison Committee. He is dead right. That is exactly what we should be doing, and it is exactly what we will do.

As always, the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) spoke from the heart about health matters. She mentioned the integrated public health plan for her city, which sounds great. Local application of what is good for local areas is right, and I look forward to hearing more about her local area when we meet.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) raised questions about the devolution settlement. Of course, we talk across England and the devolved nations, but the settled will of this Parliament and of the people in this country is that we have a devolution settlement. Devolution can bring difference, and that can be good or bad. Yes, we do talk and share best practice, and I know that NHS England and Public Health England talk to their counterparts in the devolved nations all the time.

On good and bad difference—this is not political knockabout; it is just some facts—it would be remiss of me, as a Conservative Health Minister, not to put on the record that since 2010 we have increased NHS spending each and every year, even as we have had to take some very difficult financial decisions, given the state of the public finances we inherited. The NHS now has £14 billion more to spend on caring for people than it did in 2010. To give that some context, over the past five years funding for the NHS increased in Wales by 7.2%, in Scotland by 11.5%, and in England by 17.3%. I say that not to make a political point; it is a simple fact that should be put on the record.

Let me take this opportunity once again to congratulate the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent on introducing this timely and important debate. As we have seen, the challenges that the NHS faces are radically different from those it faced in 1948. The debate has shown us why we, the Government, the NHS and the people we all represent, wherever they live in this United Kingdom, are all part of the solution to the deep and significant public health challenges we face as a nation. They are also all part of the inheritance of that health service that we are all so proud of.

In the short time available I have tried to show how seriously the Government and the NHS take those challenges. We must use all the opportunities we have at our disposal and that long-term health economic plan—I like saying that—to address the big public health challenges facing our nation. Only through the combined efforts of

the Government, the NHS and the people in our country who are taking responsibility for their own healthcare, as technology increasingly allows them to do, which was another good point made in the debate, can we truly tackle the public health challenges we face and make sure that the NHS does not just survive for another 70 years—we are not interested in that—but thrives and goes from strength to strength, being a preventive health service as much as a treatment health service. That will truly honour Nye Bevan and everyone else involved in its establishment back in the '40s.

10.56 am

**Nick Smith:** I thank my comrades and other colleagues for their contributions. I agree with the Minister that it was good to hear a Rabbie Burns poem emphasising good health. My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) praised health service workers, and I was pleased to hear that his mum is better and at home now.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) emphasised the enormous contribution that Tessa Jowell made to her career. I too would like to support and emphasise that. From the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) we heard about the huge difficulties of getting healthcare on the Scottish islands before 1948. He supported the then Attlee Government's legislative jewel in the crown: the establishment of the NHS. I thank him for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) emphasised the importance of William Beveridge and the thinking he did to address the five "giant evils" in 1942. That was important for our Labour Government after the second world war. I was pleased to hear from the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) about the Scottish Government's plans to halve child obesity. I support that, and of course it should be done everywhere. I was also pleased to hear that our parliamentary running group is getting stronger weekly.

I was glad to hear the Minister emphasise the importance of addressing child obesity, but we really must do better. I will not accept his political barbs about the NHS across our country. I remind him that Churchill and the Conservatives voted against the establishment of the NHS in 1948, and that crucial fact is never forgotten—certainly not in my constituency. I want to praise Nye and the people of my constituency for helping to establish the national health service. We on the Opposition side will guard it with every muscle in our bodies.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the 70th anniversary of the NHS and public health.

## Reproductive Rights

11 am

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to reproductive rights around the world.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, in a debate that should concern everybody in the country who is committed to equality. Abortion lies at the heart of equality for women, and men and women can never truly be equal until they have equal control over their own bodies. Abortion is the most common procedure that women of reproductive age undergo, and one in three women in Britain under the age of 45 have an abortion in their lifetime. In truth, those of us committed to equality and to ensuring that women are able to make choices about their own bodies can never be too vigilant, or think that the law in this country, let alone around the world, brings us equality and human rights. That is because there are continued attacks on that basic freedom for women, and that is what the debate is about.

I have seen and read the Minister's words, and he knows that I am a fan of his persuasive abilities. However, I want to test whether the Government will learn the lesson of the suffragette movement, which is that it is deeds not words that matter, especially when it comes to equality. The Government must not simply say that they are committed to ensuring that women have the right to decide their own sexual and reproductive health; it matters that they act, including in response to any threats to that right.

There is a big variation around the world in access to abortion. Although 98% of countries permit abortion to save the life of a woman, only 62% allow it to preserve a woman's mental health, and 63% to preserve a woman's physical health. Only 27% of countries provide abortion on request. There has been some progress. For example, in recent years there has been a heated national debate in Bolivia when it was discovered that women were being turned in by their healthcare providers. A 16-year-old girl who arrived at hospital haemorrhaging was later apprehended and accused by hospital staff of having had an abortion. New legislation in Bolivia now allows abortion in the first eight weeks of pregnancy for a broad range of circumstances.

Canada decriminalised abortion in 1988. As a result, not only is Canada's abortion rate lower than in the United Kingdom, but it enjoys the world's lowest rate of maternal mortality from abortion. Abortion is legal in many parts of South Asia, including India, Nepal and Bangladesh, although it is not always accessible. In some African countries, for example, South Africa and Ethiopia, abortion is permissible and reasonably accessible.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady agree that sensitivity to African culture must be foremost when dealing in and with African nations, and that we must always take into account their belief systems regarding sexual health and reproduction?

**Stella Creasy:** First and foremost, we should listen to African women, and they are consistently clear that they would like control over their own bodies. Being forced to continue an unwanted pregnancy is no freedom or liberation at all.

For every country where there is progress, we also see the tightening grip of the anti-choice movement. Let us not call it "pro-life"; there is nothing pro-life about forcing a woman to continue an unwanted pregnancy. In Europe—our own continent—Poland now has some of the strictest rules on abortion in the world, and abortion is allowed only if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, if the woman's life is in danger, or in cases of severe or fatal foetal abnormality. Consequently, 80,000 Polish women a year go abroad or seek illegal abortions at home.

America now has a President who says that women should be "punished" if they have an abortion, and a Vice-President who believes that women who have a miscarriage should report it and hold a funeral. One Governor signed a law that states that it is illegal to have an abortion once a foetal heartbeat has been detected. Given that heartbeats can be detected as early as six weeks into a pregnancy—sometimes before a woman even realises she is pregnant—that is no freedom or liberation at all.

In El Salvador, abortion is illegal with no exceptions, and that horrendous ban violates the basic human rights of women in that country. At least 23 women and girls remain in prison as a result of the abortion ban, and one woman, Teodora del Carmen Vasquez, walked out of prison a few weeks ago after more than a decade of imprisonment. She was marked as a criminal because she began bleeding and suffered a stillbirth. She was sentenced to 30 years for aggravated homicide, and released only after the Supreme Court ruled that there was not enough evidence to show that she had killed her baby. Abortion may be permitted in Rwanda, but Rwandan police unjustly arrest and imprison hundreds of women on abortion-related charges—such women make up 25% of the female prison population.

The number of maternal deaths resulting from illegal abortions represents the truth: banning abortion does not stop abortion; it simply makes it unsafe. In Africa, a quarter of all those who have an unsafe abortion are adolescent girls. Indeed, about half of the 20,000 Nigerian women who die from unsafe abortions each year are adolescents. It is insulting to suggest that African women do not deserve the rights that we would fight for in our country and around the world. Africa shows us how vital international aid is, as is the job that the Minister is intended to do. Abortion is relatively legal in Zambia, but only 16% of women have access to abortion facilities—in Zambia's Central Province, there is just one medical doctor for more than 110,000 patients.

Closer to home we see the impact of restrictions on access to healthcare services for women. In the Republic of Ireland, the Protection of Life during Pregnancy Act 2013 imposed an almost total criminalisation of abortion. Ireland is one of a few countries in Europe with such highly restrictive abortion laws. The Irish constitution currently affords equal rights to the life of a foetus and to the life of a woman. However, the 18,000 women from Ireland who have travelled to the UK since 2012 reflect the fact that stopping access to abortion does not stop abortion, it just puts people at risk, including—increasingly—at risk from taking pills they have bought online. At the end of this week the Irish will go to the polls. I plead for dignity, for compassion in a crisis, and to ensure that every Irish person can care for their own at home, that there will be a yes vote.

[Stella Creasy]

But who are we to lecture? We should not forget how we treat women in our own backyard, particularly in Northern Ireland, which has some of the harshest laws and punishments in Europe for women who undergo an abortion. A woman with an unwanted pregnancy in Northern Ireland must either travel to the mainland or procure abortion pills online. Since the Government agreed to fund those abortions on the NHS, more than 700 women have travelled to England or Scotland from Northern Ireland. However, those are the women who are able to travel and get away from family commitments, who are not in a coercive relationship, and who have their travel documents. Little wonder that the United Nations condemned the United Kingdom for its treatment of Northern Irish women, which it called cruel, degrading and inhuman.

The Minister might say that each of those examples is due to separate policy decisions in those countries, but I want to sound the alarm and call attention to the fact that that might not be the case. Increasingly, around the world, far-right organisations and extreme religious groups are co-ordinating and funding anti-abortion and anti-choice campaigns. We in this House are used to debating the impact of foreign countries interfering in our democracy—perhaps in referendums—and we should be alive to the fact that those foreign organisations and countries are interfering in a woman’s basic right to choose. The real “The Handmaid’s Tale” is now unfolding.

In 2013, American and European campaigners met in this capital city to plan their campaign. It is called Restoring the Natural Order: an Agenda for Europe, and it seeks to overturn basic laws on human rights related to sexuality and reproduction. Since that meeting, we have seen the impact of those organisations, and the funding they have provided. We have seen how they produced results in Poland with the ban on abortion, and with bans on equal marriage in several central European countries and action on LGBT rights. We have seen how they have targeted international aid in the UK, Europe and America.

In 2013-14 the European Citizens Initiative, One of Us, called on the European Commission to propose legislation that would ensure that EU funds could not be used to fund abortion. It garnered 1.7 million signatures, and although the EU rejected that petition, given the impact it would have on women’s healthcare, that was by no means a one-off. Such rhetoric is coming back.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I very much agree with my hon. Friend and commend her comments. Does she think that now is the moment for the Government to give enthusiastic backing to the SheDecides movement that has emerged since the decision by the American President, Donald Trump, to reimpose the global gag rule? In the light of her comments about anti-abortion campaigners coming together, that would be a powerful signal of Britain’s opposition to that movement.

**Stella Creasy:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and am extremely proud of the work that he did in government when the global gag rule was first introduced, standing up to what it represented as well as putting our money where our mouth is. We should recognise that

the global gag rule under the present President is far worse than the original one. It states that no US funds will go to any organisation that provides for women to be referred for abortion, or advocates doing so. The policy may be called “protecting life in global health assistance”, but it is clear that it is leading to an increase in maternal deaths. Trump has expanded the rule that was in force under previous Republican Presidents to cover all US health assistance funds, whereas previously it was only about family planning.

Marie Stopes International estimates that its loss of US funding will result, between 2017 and 2020, in 6.5 million unintended pregnancies, 2.1 million unsafe abortions and 21,000 maternal deaths, let alone the impact on access to reproductive healthcare, including work on HIV, gender-based violence and sexually transmitted diseases. We can already see the impact. In Botswana, the prevalence of HIV is among the highest in the world at 18.5% of the general population. The Botswana Family Welfare Association provided a range of healthcare and family planning services, and 60% of its funding has been threatened, because America is—or was—the largest funder of overseas healthcare. In Swaziland, family planning, antenatal and post-natal services and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases are key services from the Family Life Association of Swaziland, and there has been a clear impact. US support accounted for 25% of its annual funding. That is why there is now a massive funding gap that needs to be filled.

I am sure that the Minister will tell us about a summit to be held in this country in June promoting the idea that abortion is part of the services that we provide around the world, but we have not, as a country, put our money where our mouth is. We have not put money into the SheDecides fund. That matters. It does not matter if we are funding other services: our approach matters because of what the global gag rule represents, what a co-ordinated attack on a woman’s basic right to choose means, and what that says about the world, and our commitment to equality. That is why it matters whether we contribute. It is about solidarity. It is also about saying that there should be no shame in seeking an abortion. I hope we would all want women to be safe, and abortion to be legal, and rare—but we do not want women to suffer in silence or to be oppressed as the network in question would want. That network brings together President Trump and his supporters, and Russian oligarchs, in funding organisations that claim to promote family values—but only the ones that they choose.

In Poland, the “stop abortion law” was drafted by ultra-conservative lawyers from an organisation called Ordo Iuris. Agenda Europe, an organisation that started here, in our country, was able to attract senior members of the Polish Government, including the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Konrad Szymański, and the Polish Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Aleksander Stepkowski, who was also president of Ordo Iuris. The same groups are now active in Ireland, in the referendum. It is little wonder that Google and Facebook have been so concerned about the impact of foreign organisations on the fairness of the Irish referendum that they have stopped all foreign-funded advertising about the Irish referendum on their platforms. Agenda Europe summits gather a veritable “Who’s Who” of anti-choice and anti-LGBT movements around the world, such as the architects of

the Croatian traditional marriage referendum, the citizens' initiative on traditional marriage in Romania, HazteOir in Spain, which has sought abortion restrictions, and the French organization Les Survivants, which claims that everyone in French society shares a collective trauma, potentially, because of the experience of abortion. The organisation even developed a Pokémon app where the aim of the game is to save Pikachu from abortionists.

Such rhetoric and funding are clearly having an impact on our democracies and on women; they are having an effect. Indeed, Agenda Europe has targeted the Council of Europe. It would be useful to know who it works with in this country, because it is not transparent about it. If the Minister recognises the danger of the rhetoric and of a lack of solidarity over women's basic rights, will he investigate the links between organisations such as the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, Christian Action Research and Education, which funds an all-party parliamentary group in this place, and Agenda Europe? Those groups do not just mobilise and target politicians; they also spread lies such as abortion causes breast cancer, and claim that Planned Parenthood is involved in the illegal selling of foetal tissue. In developing countries, they spread rumours that the west is trying to impose western women's human rights. Internationally, they have promoted and supported the intimidation of women seeking abortions, as has happened in this country with pickets outside abortion clinics.

There have been such protests at 42 clinics already. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), who has done sterling work on the issue, has pointed out, that is not protest in the usual sense. The protesters are not seeking to change the law. They want to harass and target women who have come to a difficult decision and who seek access to lawful healthcare. Indeed, when the former Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), reviewed the matter last year, she said that it was "completely unacceptable that anyone should feel harassed or intimidated"

for exercising the legal right in question. Less than two weeks ago such protesters took part in a "march for life" through the capital city. I note that there are links with our political organisations. One person at the London meeting was Oliver Hylton, the asset manager for a UK Conservative party donor, Sir Michael Hintze. The new Conservative party vice-chair has called for a reduction in the time limit for abortion, arguing that we need to debate the issue. That is a classic tactic set out in the Agenda Europe campaign bible. That is despite evidence that 92% of abortions are carried out at less than 13 weeks' gestation in this country.

In addition, women are being criminalised for obtaining abortion pills, reflecting how our legislation and legislation around the world is crippling out of date: 5,650 women from the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland accessed pills online, to create an abortion, from Women on Web. Twenty-six per cent. were aged between 30 and 34. The majority were mothers. They were women making their own choice about how their own body should be treated. Without legal access to the pills, they risk problems. There is currently a judicial review in Northern Ireland of the case of a 15-year-old girl, whose mother procured abortion pills for her online. The girl's case was referred to social services as she was in an abusive relationship, and somehow the GP notes were turned over to the police. Even with a suspended

sentence, that young girl will have a criminal conviction. This country must not leave her in that situation. We must act to protect young women around the world making choices about their bodies. Women deserve access to what is a basic healthcare procedure, and do not deserve to be shamed for making choices about their bodies. They deserve our trust, and do not deserve to have to fight for their rights every day against a shadowy organisation involving the collusion of religious and far-right groups. They deserve a Government who will stand up to that network and stand with them.

Will the Minister investigate whether any of his ministerial colleagues have met representatives of Agenda Europe, whether in a parliamentary or political capacity? Did they, for example, take part in the decision to give Life money from the tampon tax? Have Foreign Office ministers met Agenda Europe in their lobbying work in Europe? What action is the UK taking to assist Polish women who now face one of the most restrictive regimes in the world, or to fight for the rights of women in El Salvador? Will the Government change their mind and commit to putting money into the SheDecides fund to send a strong message that those who seek to make men and women unequal will not be tolerated? Will they ensure that the laws governing access to abortion in Northern Ireland fully comply with international human rights law, including the decriminalising of abortion? Will they act to give the idea of buffer zones legal status in the UK, and promote it elsewhere? To put it simply, I trust women and we are asking whether the Government do.

11.19 am

**The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt):** It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for what she has said today and for her work in this area over a long period of time. I want to say at the outset that I am not sure that I or the Government are the targets of what she has been saying. She spoke about a variety of things in relation to campaigning, and set out a variety of attitudes with which the Government entirely agree. We are not in league with those who put a different case on abortion. Our abortion policy is clear and, as I will set out, it is clear in relation to other parts of the world. It is forward-looking. It is fully in favour of access to vital services. It is not a reluctant policy; it is a policy we advocate and are clear about.

A number of the matters that the hon. Lady raised are not within my remit, either in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or in the Department for International Development, so let me start with as much agreement as possible with the general sense of where she was coming from, while making it clear that some of the issues she wishes to tackle do not fall within my ministerial remit. It might be helpful if I first set out what we do, and the money we put in, to support women right across the world to have access to safe abortion. If she is not aware of that, it will help her and her colleagues; being aware, it is something she can champion as part of her advocacy. That she has a Government and a country that want to do what I am setting out will, I hope, form part of her argument.

Every woman, regardless of where she lives, possesses the same reproductive rights. Every woman has the right to make decisions about her own body. Every woman

[Alistair Burt]

has the right to decide whether, when, and how many children to have. Every woman has the right to make decisions that affect her own life. But the reality is that not all women are able to exercise those rights. That is why this Government, through the Department for International Development, are working tirelessly to be a loud and strong voice for access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services. We are working to enable women and girls to have sexual and reproductive choices, to avoid unwanted sexual contact, injury and infection, to make informed decisions about childbearing, and to face fewer risks in the course of pregnancy and childbirth.

The UK is the world's largest donor to the United Nations Population Fund and the second-largest donor for family planning. Access to voluntary family planning information, services and supplies is fundamental to women's and girls' empowerment. It means they can avoid a life of early, multiple and frequently dangerous pregnancies and births, and instead complete their education and fulfil their potential. That is why we have driven global investment and innovation in family planning through major summits in London in 2012 and 2017. We have committed to spending an average of £225 million a year on family planning over the next five years, enabling nearly 20 million people to use contraception, preventing 6 million unwanted pregnancies and so preventing more than 3 million abortions, many of which would be unsafe.

The UK has a proud record of putting women's and girls' rights at the centre of its international development policy. Addressing gender inequality and empowering women and girls underpins all our work to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development recently launched the new "DFID Strategic Vision for Gender Equality", which is a call to action to all our development partners to step up and act to address gender inequality in all its forms. Sexual and reproductive health and rights is one of five foundational areas in the new vision. We believe, and the evidence tells us, that that vision will work to transform the lives of women and girls, and we will continue to lead on and invest in it.

I am proud that the UK is leading the way on this. Leadership means not shying away from issues such as access to safe abortion, where the evidence shows that access to safe services saves women's lives. We are clear that access to safe abortion is a crucial element in the full range of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights services. That is not a reluctant position, but a position that firmly focuses on rights, on saving lives and on amplifying women's voices where some seek to deny them their voice and their rights. Our policy position paper sets out that approach in full.

**Stella Creasy:** Does the Minister recognise that by not being part of the SheDecides fund and by not putting some of the money he is talking about into working with other nations to send a clear message that those who seek to defund women's rights and family planning organisations because of their objections to abortion, the Government are acting in a counterproductive way? The message that sends is that the people spreading an anti-abortion message, such as Agenda Europe—I

hope he will check whether his Department has met with organisations involved in Agenda Europe—are winning. By putting the money he is talking about into the SheDecides fund, we could send a strong message about whose side we are really on. That should be women, because we trust them.

**Alistair Burt:** I do not think there is any message that we are not. I am pointing out the work we are doing. The hon. Lady called for deeds—not words or association with movements just for the sake of it and for the symbolism, but what we are actually doing. I will look at SheDecides. The position, as I think she knows, is that my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), then a Minister in the Department, went to the launch of SheDecides. We support the objectives of SheDecides. We are putting support into a whole range of services. I understand the symbolism and the point she makes. I will look at that and see whether there is more to be done than simply supporting and putting money into what SheDecides does. If an attachment to SheDecides makes a difference, that may be something that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I will want to do.

I urge the hon. Lady not to take our decision not to be formally involved in that, but to support that work, to mean that all the other work we are doing either does not matter or is not important enough. That is dancing on the head of a pin. It degrades all the work that all our colleagues are doing all over the world to defend women's rights, promote women's services and promote access to safe abortion, just because we are not doing one thing that she would like us to do. I am not sure I want to go down that route. I would rather defend what we do and how positive and forward-looking it is.

**Gareth Thomas:** I do not think that anybody on the Opposition side questions the investment that the Government are making through the Department for International Development—I welcome that. The concern is that the Government have not had the courage to stand up to the American President over his reintroduction of the global gag rule and to show solidarity with all the other countries that have challenged him and are seeking to galvanise even greater investment in access to reproductive services, to plug the gap that the American decision on the global gag rule has left.

**Alistair Burt:** I take the point. Again, our work concentrates on advocating for the best services, and on getting individual states and people within those states to understand the purpose and importance of access to safe abortion. Being involved with political movements is a different question. We are keen to ensure that the work we do supports the policies behind something such as SheDecides, which is what we are doing.

**Stella Creasy:** I just want to clarify that Agenda Europe and the work that Donald Trump and Mike Pence are doing is a political movement.

**Alistair Burt:** And we have no interest in that either.

**Stella Creasy:** SheDecides is an international aid initiative. It is a cross-country initiative by Governments in response to that political movement. Indeed, the point of this debate is to sound the alarm about that

political movement around the world, whether it is interfering in the Irish referendum or in international aid. By not standing up to it, we are by default encouraging that political movement as it becomes stronger and therefore women are more oppressed by it.

**Alistair Burt:** I have already given a commitment to go back and look at the engagement with SheDecides. I will make it quite clear: we support the overarching principles of SheDecides; a Minister attended the launch; we work with all partners who are promoting universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights; and we think that it is most sustainable to demonstrate our commitment to those issues through long-term, sustained support for sexual and reproductive health and rights. We face the consequences of US policy not just in this area, but in others. The response we have delivered so far is to put investment and support into the work that is done, and to say, “This is the best answer to those who wish to close it down.”

I take the point that the hon. Lady and colleagues have challenged me on in relation to the SheDecides movement, but I ask her not to be completely distracted by that. Our deeds in supporting and promoting services, the £1.25 billion that we are putting into this work through our support for family planning services, and the work we are doing in a variety of other areas—I can set them out in a letter to the hon. Lady, as we are running short of time—demonstrate our commitment to what is done.

I take the point about the political movement. I have no knowledge of or connection with the other movement she speaks about—I have never met Europe Now, or whoever they are. I am not aware of any contact in the Department, but I will check. But I would not want us to be pinned on this question in this debate, in which the hon. Lady has spoken about things that I believe in and I want to see. She has spoken about things that the Government are doing and delivering, and she seeks to pin me on one particular part of it, a political policy in relation to a particular movement that we already support and attended the launch of. In all fairness, she is trying to find a very small area of difference between us.

**Gareth Thomas:** That is not fair.

**Alistair Burt:** That is how it sounds. The message from this debate should be, “We support each other, and we support what we are trying to do.” If we campaign together, we might have even more success with this policy than we already have.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.30 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Housing and Access to Legal Aid

[MRS ANNE MAIN *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered housing and access to legal aid.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Main. Before I start, I want to thank the House of Commons Library, which provided me with advice and information for the debate, and the Ealing law centre.

Having been an elected councillor for 25 years before coming to this place, I know how important good-quality, early professional help is in preventing so many issues, but particularly homelessness, indebtedness and other related problems. I also know how important early advice is in preventing problems from escalating, which causes stress to families and costs to the public purse. The sooner and the earlier, the better and the cheaper.

Legal aid for housing advice was withdrawn by the Government between 2012 and 2013. At that time, we saw problems that were already there begin to escalate. More and more people were having problems trying to keep their home and to keep it safe and warm. Demand for social housing was increasing but there was an acute shortage, owing to the right to buy and the ending of Government funding for new council and other social rent housing.

Related to that was the escalation of private sector rents beyond the means of average wage earners, let alone those on low and minimum wages. In my constituency, private sector rents are three to four times those of council rents. There is also the related use of one-term tenancies, as landlords can afford to gain possession of a home and then rent it to someone else who is able to pay a higher rent in the inflated west London housing market. The escalation of zero-hours work and low-paid self-employment also affects the ability of many people on low incomes to pay their rents, while for many people, some of whom are working and some of whom are not, cuts and changes to many benefits and tax credits mean that there is less to live on. Finally, the draconian universal credit rules were introduced, which—apart from providing less to live on than legacy benefits—expect claimants to wait for five weeks with no money at all. In my constituency, five weeks of rent for a family can be anything up to £2,000.

It is therefore hardly surprising that more people need more help with housing and debt, or that landlords can get away with providing more substandard private sector housing, where repairs need catching early before they make homes dangerous. MPs and councillors offer advice, but too often it is left to underfunded organisations and their many advisers, who might not be legally qualified, to help; they might be willing and able, but one often needs legally qualified people, even at an early advice stage.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does she agree that there has been a serious decline in

[Stephanie Peacock]

the number of providers of housing legal aid? In my area of Barnsley there are only two, which is simply insufficient. It leaves those most in need isolated and often without the help they need.

**Ruth Cadbury:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are parts of the country with no appropriate legal advice services. For people in rural areas, having to travel tens of miles to find the appropriate advice, when they are already on a low income, is shocking.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. North-west Wales has only one provider of housing legal aid for a population of more than 300,000 people. Travel has already been mentioned, but we should also note that a single provider might not have the capacity to deal with the needs of all its potential clients, and may well have to put people on lists based on their needs. Some people who need urgent help might not be reached. Secondly, that single provider may also—  
[*Interruption.*]

**Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair):** Order. The hon. Lady is not making a speech. There should be no first and secondly; there is one intervention.

**Ruth Cadbury:** The hon. Lady is absolutely correct. The other problem if there is only one legal aid provider is that both parties might go to them. There are then problems, because to whom should it offer help and advice?

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Even when there are providers that can provide legal advice, such as Citizens Advice, cuts to their financial situations mean that it is thrown on us to help people out.

**Ruth Cadbury:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The cuts to local authorities and other parts of the public sector have affected the voluntary sector, which has so often been the alternative provider of professional, consistent, good-quality advice and support to people who need it.

There is currently no law centre in my area. When I was a lead member on Hounslow Council in 2010, we increased the funding for the citizens advice bureau, but demand for the local CAB escalated well beyond that. The philanthropic centres and foundations—the Big Lottery Fund and so on—are often left to pick up the pieces, but pressures on their funding are getting greater. Overall, less good-quality professional help and advice is available in the sector, and I urge the Government to address that as part of their review, which I will move on to in a moment.

As I was saying, MPs and councillors are not professional legal advisers. At best we should signpost and provide basic advice, but we do not have the capacity or skills to provide the detailed advice that people need, even at the early stages of problems arising. I will give a couple of examples that Vicky Fewkes of the Ealing law centre provided me with. They concern people who much of the time were not eligible for housing legal aid. In all

cases, the welfare and benefits work that was done was under grant funding, not legal aid.

First, a constituent was in substantial rent arrears due to universal credit issues. Her tenancy was jointly in her name and that of her partner. However, she had been abused by her partner, which led to their separating and her partner moving out. Universal credit would not pay her full rent due to the tenancy being in both names. She was given time to transfer the tenancy into her name and resolve the universal credit issues. The adviser worked with her and managed to resolve the matter, and to retrieve about £5,000 in universal credit housing payments. She kept her home—at substantial cost to the public sector, of course. That case was not funded through legal aid, but I believe it should have been.

In another example, a constituent was in arrears of more than £2,500 following the stoppage of her employment and support allowance and housing benefit. She had four children, aged between 11 and 19, and she suffered from depression, anxiety and physical problems. Her housing benefit had been cancelled due to the required information not being supplied. The caseworker worked with her and her husband to claim backdated housing benefit. The caseworker liaised with the council and worked with the husband to answer all the council's questions and provide the required evidence. The hearings were adjourned until the ESA and housing benefit issues could be resolved. The ESA decision was appealed and overturned, meaning that she eventually got a backdated ESA payment and £4,000 in housing benefit being paid into her rent account, meaning that she kept her home. She was a council tenant. If she had been a private sector tenant, that landlord would not have waited for her income situation to be resolved.

Vicky says of the crisis navigator role at the Ealing law centre:

“The Crisis Navigator is part of a Big Lottery funded Help through Crisis Project. This work is essential and is not being funded by Legal Aid as it stands at the moment. A lot of problems arise from insecure work (variable hours/zero contracts). These then impact benefits and rent arrears as a result. If clients are evicted if they are housed by local authorities, then the temp accommodation rent is so high and Housing Benefit is being paid for this.”

In my area, west London, housing benefit caps are well below the rent even for poor-quality private sector housing. Finally, Vicky says:

“It really would make sense to provide benefits support at an early stage.”

The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, which I will refer to as LASPO, made fundamental changes to eligibility for legal aid. Under LASPO, applicants must pass three basic tests. The case must be within the scope of the legal aid scheme; there is a financial means test to pass; and there is a merits test, looking at the applicant's chance of success in the case and a cost-benefit analysis of providing legal aid funding. Matters that are included in the scope of legal aid are homelessness; allocations; accommodation for asylum seekers; repossession of a rented home, but only when the loss of the home is imminent and the landlord has sought an order for possession; lawful and unlawful eviction from the home; injunctions relating to harassment; antisocial behaviour cases in the county court; disrepair, but only when there is a serious risk of harm to the

health or safety of the occupiers; and judicial review. Areas that are no longer eligible for legal aid under LASPO are rent and mortgage arrears that may ultimately result in possession proceedings; early stage disputes between landlords and tenants—

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned early legal advice. Of course, one recommendation from the Bach commission is that early legal advice can help to save money in the long run. The Law Society estimates that the cost of early legal advice on housing benefit claims would be £1.7 million to £2 million each year, but the costs through avoidable evictions are often far greater for individuals, councils and the NHS. Will—

**Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair)**: Order. Would the hon. Lady sit down? There is plenty of opportunity to speak. These are not interventions when they are of such length. Please form a question quickly to the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury).

**Ellie Reeves**: Does my hon. Friend agree that reintroducing early legal advice would help to solve the housing crisis?

**Ruth Cadbury**: Absolutely. My hon. Friend anticipates what I will come on to in a minute.

Not only are early-stage disputes between landlords and tenants no longer eligible for legal aid, but housing benefit advice is no longer eligible. That is particularly worrying because of the many changes to the benefits system, to which I have referred. As I said, when people transfer to universal credit, there is no payment for up to five weeks. That is a lot of money and a lot of heartache, particularly for tenants in the private sector whose landlords are not prepared to wait until things are resolved. However, the situation is worrying even for housing association or council tenants. I try to reassure them by saying, “Don’t worry. The council will not evict you on this basis.” However, it is still stress and worry that people do not need, and many people go and borrow money, which they can ill afford to repay, from friends, relatives and payday lenders. It causes massive problems.

Since LASPO was introduced in 2012-13, there has been a 58% fall in legal help for housing cases in England and Wales; the number has gone from just over 85,000 per annum to just over 35,500 per annum. As we have mentioned, LASPO has caused a critical decline in the number of housing legal aid providers, from 646 in the year before LASPO to 427. The Law Society found in July 2016 that one third of legal aid areas have just one solicitor providing specialised housing advice through legal aid. Areas such as Surrey, Shropshire and Suffolk had no legal aid provider specialising in housing. That is shocking.

A review of LASPO in respect of legal aid for housing advice and aid is urgently needed, but I want to focus now on the area raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves)—early legal advice. Without early legal advice, a problem can escalate, which costs the tenant stress and possibly the loss of their home. That causes knock-on costs for the public purse, poor health, homelessness and debt. I have met several families in my surgery and in my work

as an MP outside the surgery who did not seek early advice. They left their home when the landlord asked them to; they did not wait for the court order, let alone the bailiffs. As a result, they were deemed intentionally homeless, so the housing department was able to discharge its duty to house them. How many people know the ins and outs of housing law sufficiently to know what I know, which is, “Wait until the bailiffs arrive”? Most people want to do the right thing. They are scared by their landlords. They think that they can sofa-surf for a while and sort something out. Reality is not like that, particularly in the very high-cost areas of west London that I represent.

As I said, if people are deemed intentionally homeless, the housing department is able to discharge its duty to house them. If they have children, then under the Children Act 1989 social services, quite rightly, have to find them a home. That is yet more work and costs for already overstretched social workers, who are not housing specialists, and it means that social services are competing for the small amount of private sector accommodation from which the housing department is seeking temporary accommodation. And there are all those people who come to live and work in London, who are also looking for accommodation.

Under LASPO, legal advice is not available for disrepair until it affects the tenant’s health, or for possible eviction unless a possession notice has been granted. In November 2017, the Law Society called for legal aid to be reintroduced for early advice in respect of family and housing law, saying:

“Everyone knows that if you catch a problem early, you’re more likely to stop it getting worse.”

The Law Society research showed that, on average, one in four people who received early professional legal advice had resolved their problem within three to four months, but for those who did not get any legal advice, it was not until nine months after the issue first occurred that one in four had resolved their issue, and those getting no early advice were 20% less likely on average to have their problem resolved.

The Law Society, in making its report, was not angling for more work for its members—in fact, probably the opposite, as it recognises that legal problems, like so much in life, are easier and cheaper to deal with early on. The Law Society estimates that restoring housing benefit advice to the legal aid system could be done for about £2 million a year. That is based on the cost of pre-LASPO advice in relation to housing benefits. It also suggests that restoration of early advice on mortgage arrears, which is now outside the legal aid remit, could prevent escalation of arrears and further costs of possession proceedings and, by the way, reduce some of the additional costs arising from legal aid cuts.

I am really pleased that in April, the Labour party announced its new policy to restore legal advice in all housing cases. That came from one of the recommendations of the justice commission chaired by Lord Bach, which was established by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) when he became leader of the Labour party; it was one of the first things he did in that role. The Bach report estimates that restoring legal advice funded by legal aid could help up to 50,000 households a year to enforce their housing rights.

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

By responding to Labour's announcement and starting to provide funding for early professional legal advice for housing matters, the Government would really be making a difference to many people in our constituencies. That would almost certainly mean a lower volume of cases going to court, as they could be resolved earlier. Wider benefits and savings would include avoiding health issues caused by significant disrepair; not having to pay housing benefit for high-cost temporary housing; fewer people becoming homeless; and fewer leaving rent arrears and mortgage debts unaddressed.

Everyone should have the right to a safe and decent home, so I ask the Government to take the opportunity presented by the review of LASPO announced last October to recommend returning to the legal aid scheme the ability to obtain legal advice for housing matters, and to have a fundamental review of legal aid as it applies to housing issues. I look hopefully at the answer that the Minister gave my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on 23 January this year on this very issue.

2.49 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on bringing this issue forward. It is a pity that there are not more hon. Members here, but there are debates in the other Chamber and I suspect that is where most are.

We live in a time when there are more breakdowns in the home. The family home no longer has the nuclear family. This sad breakdown has life-changing aspects for the children. It also puts more pressure on housing, as more houses are needed. The necessity of legal support is a by-product of that. The hon. Lady outlined the issues we experience every day in our constituency offices, dealing with those going through a family break-up. The Relationships Foundation, in a report which I hope others have had a chance to look at, calculates that the annual cost of family breakdown has risen to an all-time high of £51 billion. That gives us an idea of the financial cost involved in the breakdown of couples and their lives. That figure—up from £37 billion 10 years ago—takes into account the cost to the taxpayer of families splitting up across areas including tax, benefits, housing, health, social care, civil and criminal justice, and education.

A BBC poll from the week before Christmas found that one in 10 of 16 to 25-year-olds had spent at least one month sofa-surfing, and it has been said that up to 60% of youth homelessness is down to family breakdowns. We want to address the issue of legal aid, and we would also address some of the issues of homelessness by doing so. Every one of us is concerned about homelessness. We cannot not be concerned, if we look at what is happening in our constituencies and further afield. Almost half of 15-year-olds do not live with both parents, which is double the OECD average. We also have one of the highest percentages of lone parents in Europe. These stats show not only the extent of relationship breakdowns, but the impact of those breakdowns upon housing in particular, and why we need to focus, as the hon. Lady said, on how we address those issues.

Family breakdown has put a lot more pressure on so many aspects of life. Further, with this amount of separation and difficulty, people need access to sound advice; moreover, they need help. This is about giving the right help at the right time to those who need it. It is up to us to ensure that there are mechanisms in place to provide the help and support that is needed for people to live their lives.

I do not watch much TV, but I do get the chance when I get home at about 11 o'clock or 12 o'clock at night, when "Can't Pay? We'll Take it Away!" is on. That programme shows people in the most desperate circumstances. In some of those cases, the people have brought it upon themselves, but in many cases people find themselves in difficulties because they do not understand the legal system. They do not understand what the power of eviction means when the enforcement officers come to change the locks on the doors or ask them to leave. There are some important things to address there.

We need to put on the record our thanks to some of those charitable groups that step in to help those who are homeless and who have problems. There are many good people out there from church groups and community groups—all round good people, who do charitable work. I have had men in my office who have made personal mistakes. I am nobody's judge in this world—far from it—and I never will be, but sometimes things happen and relationships break down. That is the nature of where we are. I can, however, do one thing, and that is to help that person. Those people have had to leave their family home and they have no idea of what to do next. They do not know what the Northern Ireland Housing Executive or housing associations are in Northern Ireland. They do not know how to change their tax code, address the issue of benefits and many other things. That all adds to the stress of the marriage breakdown. People have no idea of the help that should be received and often end up paying over the odds for sub-standard housing, which they feel they are unable to fight against and change.

The beauty of legal aid is that it allows people to understand the bare minimum they can expect of a landlord or a housing body. I have seen the look of fear on the faces of people who come to me. I have to refer them on for legal advice, as the hon. Lady mentioned, because I am not legally qualified. When they ask me about a legal matter, I have to say, "I do not have the capacity or ability to respond to that, but I can point you in the direction of someone who can." It is our job to point them in the direction of someone who can give them legal advice.

Over the years, I have been fortunate to have a good relationship with the solicitors in the main town of Newtownards, where I have my advice centre. I can often phone up and ask them—without any charge—"What advice would you give to someone in these circumstances?" That is a rudimentary thing. They say, "Well, I suggest you do this, that and the other." There are many people out there who would like to help. It would not be legally correct for me to give them advice. When I know that someone does not have the money for legal advice, I make phone calls to the solicitors that I know in town.

Legal aid is a way of enabling those who work, but cannot afford a legal battle to know their rights and, more importantly, to have access to justice. We have to

have access to justice to help the people in the greatest need. *The Independent* recently produced an article, which I will quote for *Hansard*:

“Households earning more than £2,657 a month before tax are excluded from legal aid, while many that earn substantially less than this are only eligible for partial financial help...Some of those who qualify for legal aid but are not on state benefits still have to make a contribution towards the cost—at a level which is often far beyond their means.”

That is what I see in my office and, I believe, other hon. Members see in their offices and in their contact with their constituents.

Although I disagree with legal aid funds being used for multimillion-pound test cases—I do not want to see that money going there—which has become all too common, I firmly believe that legal aid access must be expanded to those who work but who still live hand-to-mouth. Let me back that up with some figures. It has been stated that 60% of families living in poverty in Britain have at least one member of the family working. They work to live and cannot afford the luxury of legal advice. As the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) said, many of the people who come to me have a low wage and are unable to afford legal aid. They are in a grey area that, unfortunately, precludes them from seeking legal advice. It is also telling that of that 60%, the majority live in private rented accommodation and therefore may need access to legal advice, and yet are precluded from that as well.

I look to the Minister for some help, ever mindful of this debate. I presume the shadow Minister's contribution will be close to what we are all saying. We look to the Minister for a response. We need to look again at the parameters of legal aid and stop those who use public money to fund their personal agenda, while still allowing those who are being treated unfairly, yet cannot afford to pay the price of justice, to access legal aid, especially in the realm of housing.

2.57 pm

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on securing this debate. It is one in a series of debates we have had in Westminster Hall on access to justice and legal aid more generally. That is essential, as we keep pressure on the Government during their internal review of the operation of LASPO.

From the outset, the hon. Lady identified the clear importance of early advice and the benefits that can bring in avoiding the escalation of difficulties and challenges into outright crises, and also in terms of cost. She put the debate in the appropriate context of a crazy housing market, austerity and cuts, challenges posed by universal credit and the complexity of housing law. All of that means that good and early advice is absolutely essential, but unfortunately it is becoming increasingly difficult to access. I join the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in paying tribute to those who are doing immense charitable work to support homeless people who have fallen foul of the challenges identified. They are overworked and under-appreciated. As he recognised, the key is to deliver advice that can prevent homelessness in the first place.

In my view and the view of my party, LASPO was a disastrous piece of legislation based on the utterly ill-conceived idea that taking whole swathes of civil law outside the scope of legal aid would be key to cutting costs, but would have no impact on access to justice. From the Justice Committee to the National Audit Office, from the Public Accounts Committee to the Lord Chief Justice, from the legal profession to third sector organisations, nobody has a good word to say about the changes introduced by that Act. The Justice Committee found that LASPO had unambiguously failed in three of its four stated goals: targeting legal aid towards those who need it most; delivering better overall value for money; and discouraging unnecessary and adversarial litigation. In relation to the fourth target, the Committee stated that,

“while it had made significant savings in the cost of the scheme, the Ministry had harmed access to justice for some litigants”.

Housing is an area of law that highlights many of the Committee's points. Although a handful of housing law elements remain in the scope of legal aid, the absence of funding for early legal advice illustrates everything that is wrong about LASPO. Allowing legal aid for those who are about to lose their house but not those who are in rent arrears or struggling with housing benefit, is frankly absurd. It does not target legal aid at those who need it most. It provides legal aid to exactly the same people, but only after the crisis has become full-blown and perhaps impossible to resolve, instead of in its early stages when resolution would have been much easier. Nor does it deliver better value for money, because to fund someone defending eviction proceedings in court is clearly significantly more expensive than giving a small amount of advice earlier in the process. Self-evidently, it does not help to discourage adversarial litigation, except in the sense that some tenants will simply not manage to challenge rogue landlords, which I will come back to later. The Justice Committee pretty much says that in express terms, stating:

“The Ministry's efforts to target legal aid at those who most need it have suffered from the weakness that they have often been aimed at the point after a crisis has already developed, such as in housing repossession cases, rather than being preventive.”

As regards cost savings, it would be interesting to see a detailed analysis of the impact of removing many elements of housing law from the scope of legal aid. We should include in that not only the extent to which costs are moved from the provision of early legal advice to defending evictions in court and other such crisis procedures, but the financial impact on other services such as those relating to homelessness, housing, social work and health.

Instead of achieving the goals set for it, LASPO has left advice deserts, as was highlighted in several interventions. One third of legal aid areas have been left with just one specialist housing solicitor to provide legally aided advice, and some areas have none at all. The overall number of providers is down by a third, and it is actually a surprise that it has not fallen further, given the 58% fall in the number of legal help matters started for housing since LASPO was introduced. In 2016-17, there were almost 50,000 fewer cases than before the Act came into force, and that is a year in which exceptional case funding for housing and land law reached a record high of seven successful applications out of 48.

[*Stuart C. McDonald*]

We need to ask who benefits from the system. In this area of law, it can only be those rogue landlords who breach tenants' rights and who will increasingly be left unchallenged. LASPO can only have encouraged a culture where a lack of access to easy legal redress leads to more problems with rogue landlords across England and Wales. According to the Law Society, advice on housing benefits, rent arrears and other housing issues could be restored for as little as £2 million. It is an absolute no-brainer. The Government do not need to wait for any review to get on with that.

None of that is to deny the pressures that the Government face in terms of spending and ensuring that the legal aid budget is sustainable. However, my party does not believe that taking vast swathes of important legal advice outwith the scope of legal aid is the answer; in fact it can be utterly counter-productive, as this debate has shown.

That is why, in government in Scotland, we have continued to fund a legal aid system that is comprehensive in scope, including housing law, and generous in its eligibility criteria. The Scottish Government are considering the recommendations of the independent report that they commissioned to ensure that the system is made sustainable for the future, not through crazy cuts to the scope of legal aid, but through innovation, enhancing fairness and flexibility.

LASPO should be scrapped by the UK Government and they should go back to the drawing board. That is almost certainly what any independent report would tell them. If the Government's internal review merely seeks to tinker around the edges, it will be seen and called out as the whitewash that that would undoubtedly represent. As I have said, there is no need to wait. The case for comprehensive legal aid for housing issues is overwhelming.

3.3 pm

**Gloria De Piero** (Ashfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on securing this important debate. I confess that I feel a heavy sense of déjà vu standing opposite the Minister once again: it is another week and yet another debate on the devastating impact of the Government's cuts to legal aid. This time the issue is housing.

Most of us expect the right to a decent home that does not suck in two thirds of our income each month, that does not give us health problems and that does not endanger our safety. For too many people across the country, however, that expectation is simply not a reality anymore. We have a housing crisis in this country. Home ownership among young adults has collapsed. The Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that the chance of someone owning their own home has halved over the past 20 years. The number of council houses is at a record low. The Government have overseen the lowest rate of house building since the 1920s, which pushes more and more people to spend years in the private sector, but they have not made it safer or more secure to be a tenant; they have made it much harder.

Because of the cuts in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, it is now more difficult to challenge a rogue landlord, to obtain

compensation for damages to health and property because of poor living conditions, or to access basic advice that could prevent someone from losing their home down the line. New figures that we have uncovered show that 4,815 fewer people a year are being granted civil legal aid for representation on housing matters, including faulty repairs and poor maintenance of a property by landlords, as well as more serious issues such as possession of a home or where a tenant's health or welfare is at serious risk. That is a drop of one third over the past five years—close to 5,000 more people a year are being denied the right to challenge poor living conditions and unfair treatment. Does the Minister recognise that there is a crisis in access to legal aid for housing issues?

The Government have set the bar so high for legal aid that housing lawyers warn that it is

“very difficult for a tenant to obtain funding in order to bring a claim against their landlord.”

Legal aid is available in disrepair cases only where it can be proven that there is

“a serious risk of harm to the health or safety of the individual or a relevant member of the individual's family”.

That bar means that a persistent cough that is likely being caused by mould or damp, or risk of accidental injury because of shoddy work, is often not enough to qualify for legal aid. If someone develops serious health problems as a result of poor living conditions that landlords refuse to sort out, the Government have taken away the legal aid to obtain compensation.

Ministers might argue that for the most serious cases, legal aid may still be available through the exceptional case funding scheme, but only 13 cases have been approved for exceptional funding since the legal aid changes were introduced—out of 211 applications. The truth is that people are simply being denied access to justice and have nowhere else to turn. It is the same old story of a two-tiered system; justice in this country is available only to those who have the money to pay for it.

That is not just the case for taking a claim to court. Many housing issues can and should be resolved at an earlier stage by people getting the right advice about their rights, but the Government's cuts to housing legal aid included the removal of early legal advice. The effect is that tenants must now wait for a minor damp problem to have a serious effect on their family's health before they can challenge a bad landlord and force repairs to be made. Rather than resolving a dispute with a landlord early with good legal advice, tenants face the point of being made homeless before they have access to legal aid. Since the introduction of LASPO, the number of cases of legal advice for housing has more than halved. It is not just housing cases; overall, the total number of legal advice cases has fallen by three quarters, which means that more than 400,000 fewer people are getting housing advice. That is not just bad for tenants; it is short-sighted policy making that will ultimately cost the country more.

The vice-president of the Law Society, Christina Blacklaws, has said:

“The current situation is unsustainable. If early advice was available to those who need it, issues could be resolved before they worsen and become more costly for the individual – and the public purse.”

The charity Citizens Advice estimates that every £1 of legal aid spent on housing advice has the potential to save £2.34 to the public purse. Lack of support to

resolve a case early means potentially far more costly court proceedings down the line.

It is not just by helping to avoid court that early advice benefits the public purse. Social problems such as homelessness and debt, and health problems that come with not sorting out housing issues early, are a ticking time bomb for the Government. At the end of last year the Law Society published research that found that a quarter of those who received early advice resolved their problems within three to four months, compared with an average of nine months for those who did not receive early advice. Those costs must be factored into any assessment of the savings realised from cuts to legal aid. Will the Government, as part of their review of legal aid, publish their own cost-benefit analysis of the wider impact of reducing early legal advice?

Labour Members agree with the President of the Supreme Court, Lady Justice Hale, who described the Government's legal aid reforms as "a false economy". That is why we have announced that a Labour Government will restore early legal advice in housing cases to prevent small problems escalating into big ones. The impact of the Government's cuts is not only being felt in cases where legal aid has been removed. Even in cases where individuals should still be entitled to legal aid, such as risk of homelessness, tenants are finding that support is not available because lawyers in their area have had to close up shop.

Hon. Members have already referred to the legal advice deserts, so I will not repeat those findings, but I will say that figures uncovered by the Bach commission on legal aid confirmed that, finding that the number of civil legal aid providers specialising in housing has declined by a third, from 681 to 449. What urgent action are the Government taking to reverse those trends to ensure that no area is left without a single legal advice provider?

The Government's changes have made it simply not possible to operate for such a narrow category of cases, and the impact has been devastating. We are living through a time of high repossessions of homes and homelessness has risen by 78% since 2011. Yet at the same time there has been a steep decline in the number of challenges brought against eviction, according to figures from the Legal Action Group. Charities such as Shelter have warned that thousands of people a year are being made homeless because they cannot find lawyers to help them prevent eviction. The Government's changes to legal aid have brought nothing but misery and pain since they were introduced. We have waited six years for the Government's review into legal aid, but victims cannot wait any longer. I urge the Minister to heed the advice of the Law Society and legal professionals across the country and reinstate early advice for housing matters and take action now to prevent any more families being forced into destitution because of the lack of legal aid.

3.11 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to a debate on such an important issue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on securing it. She is highly committed to this issue as she was a shadow Housing Minister. I

offer my congratulations to her on completing the London marathon at the end of April, raising money for two causes, including the housing charity Shelter, which does excellent work.

The hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned the importance of the work that third parties do to support people in society, such as the work of the Law Centres Network and the CAB. There are many pro bono organisations put forward by the legal profession and, as the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out, church groups. I, too, would like to add my support for the work that they do.

I want to emphasise the importance of the legal aid system. The Ministry of Justice spends £1.6 billion a year on legal aid, one fifth of the Ministry's overall budget, which is not an insubstantial sum. It is right that we spend a significant amount of money on legal aid, but there are not unlimited resources available to the Government, so it is right that we spend the money on the people who need it most: those who are the most vulnerable, those who face the most significant issues in their lives and those who have no alternative to legal support. Those principles are fair. It is right to recognise that this debate takes place in that context.

The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth suggested there is not enough legal aid support for legal advice. I will identify and correct some apprehensions about legal aid and housing. As many hon. Members have identified, legal aid for housing assistance is available. Legal aid, including early legal help, is available to help those who face homelessness to access accommodation and assistance. It is available to defend individuals who are being evicted from their home or having it repossessed; to ensure that homes are safe for habitation; and to obtain injunctions preventing harassment from landlords and others.

Legal aid is available for judicial review if a local authority subsequently fails to take action or those affected wish to challenge the conduct of the local authority. For example, if the rehousing proposed is not suitable, legal aid would be available to bring a challenge. It is available if there has been a significant breach of convention rights or abuse by someone in a position of power. Legal aid is also available to bring a damages claim. As I have mentioned, the Government have protected legal aid for those facing the most challenging situations in their lives, whether that is the threat of homelessness or dangerous conditions that pose a risk to the life, health or safety of their families.

**Ellie Reeves:** I note what the Minister says about situations where legal aid is available, but does she not accept that, since the LASPO reforms, housing cases have fallen by 50%? That is a huge increase in the number of people not getting access to justice in housing cases. Does she agree that the review of LASPO should reverse that?

**Lucy Frazer:** As the hon. Lady has identified, there is a review into the changes that were made. The Act aimed to cut legal aid, so availability was reduced in many areas. However, the fundamental principle behind the changes in the Act were to ensure that those who most needed help and could not get it from any other sources retained the ability to get legal aid. As I have mentioned, that is being reviewed.

[Lucy Frazer]

I have identified the areas where we provide legal aid in housing, but we need to look at how it is provided. As the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth identified, it is important that we have early legal help. Last year, we spent nearly £100 million on early legal advice across all categories, including housing. Advice for housing is available through face-to-face meetings or through telephone advice. The telephone service offers services beyond that which can be provided at local centres face to face. For example, the telephone service can offer interpretation in more than 170 languages, including British sign language via webcam, which operates over the weekend. Last year, there were more than 20,000 instances of advice provided by that system. It allows individuals to access advice quickly and easily.

Legal aid is also available for representation at hearings. People can access representations from individuals already engaged in their case and giving them legal help. In addition, the housing possession court duty scheme is a vital service that offers on-the-day advice and advocacy at court to anyone facing possession proceedings. Individuals in danger of eviction or having their home repossessed can get free legal advice and representation on the day of their hearing, regardless of their financial circumstances.

The hon. Members for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) talked about gaps in advice, which they called advice deserts. We in the Ministry of Justice are committed to ensuring that everyone has sufficient advice to help, wherever they live. I should make it clear that the Legal Aid Agency regularly monitors market capability to ensure that there is adequate provision around the country, and moves quickly to ensure that face-to-face advice is available to prevent gaps appearing. Of the 134 housing and debt procurement areas for legal aid across England and Wales, all but one currently have provision. The Legal Aid Agency has recently secured provision for the remaining one and services will commence there shortly.

On the procurement of legal aid services, the Legal Aid Agency has recently re-tendered for new civil contracts to start in autumn 2018. The procurement includes contracts for both face-to-face advice and telephone advice for housing matters. I am pleased to say that the Legal Aid Agency received tenders from more than 1,700 organisations wishing to deliver face-to-face civil legal aid work. Those organisations submitted over 4,300 individual bids. Successful applicants for face-to-face contracts were notified in January. The new contract encourages providers to be flexible as to where and how advice can be delivered, including making better use of technology. A good level of response was received, with an overall increase in the number of providers wishing to do the work. In areas where an access gap is identified, the Legal Aid Agency will take steps to secure provision. In addition, to reflect the nature of today's society, we have developed a user-friendly digital tool that makes it clear to people when legal aid is available to them. If someone is unsure which organisations offer legal aid in a given area, they can use the "find a legal aid adviser" tool on gov.uk to find the 10 nearest organisations to them that have a contract to offer advice and assistance through legal aid in that category of law.

A number of hon. Members raised issues that went wider than legal aid for housing. The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth spoke about welfare claims. We work closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that it gets decisions right first time and they do not end up in a tribunal. We are making changes using technology to improve the social security tribunals. The hon. Member for Strangford rightly identified the consequences of family breakdown. At the Ministry of Justice we are looking at ways to avoid the impact on families of conflict resulting from breakdown.

The hon. Member for Ashfield made some broad points about the Government's record on housing and I should like to clarify the position. The Government have done a significant amount to improve the housing stock and to help first-time buyers and people who want to leave home. We have built 1 million homes since 2010. House building is at its highest level since the crash. We have abolished stamp duty for 80% of first-time buyers and brought in landmark legislation—the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—to improve the life of people who have no home and sleep rough on the streets. Fewer than 3,000 local authority homes were built under Labour from 1997 to 2010. Since 2010, nearly 11,000 homes have been built.

Many hon. Members mentioned the LASPO review. The reforms in question were made under LASPO, and I have said that they were founded on the principle of ensuring that legal aid will continue to be available for the highest-priority cases. It is important that legal aid should be focused on those least able to pay for representation. The changes were subject to a significant amount of scrutiny in during the passage of the legislation through the House of Commons. They were debated extensively and amended before they were approved by Parliament.

As the Scottish National party spokesman, hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), pointed out, we are in the process of a broader review of legal aid. Matters covered by the review will include housing advice changes and early legal advice. Given that there is an outstanding review, the debate is a valuable opportunity to listen to the many thoughtful points made by hon. Members. We are currently engaging with a wide range of stakeholders across the legal sector, individually and in consultative groups. The first round of consultative group meetings took place last month, and they were well received. We are keen to hear from as many interested parties as possible, to establish the impact of the changes.

As well as looking back over the record of LASPO and some previous decisions, it is crucial that we look forward to ensure that access to justice, to which legal aid makes a hugely valuable contribution, will be maintained and will meet the needs of a modern society. We are investing £1 billion to transform courts and tribunals and build on our world-renowned justice system, so that it will be more sensitive to victims, more modern—so that it works more efficiently and swiftly—and more accessible. As part of that we shall digitise our services to make them easier for the public to use. It is essential that we continue our work to ensure that legal aid is made available to the most vulnerable, as part of that wider approach to making the justice system fit for the 21st century.

3.24 pm

**Ruth Cadbury:** I thank hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. The hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) made valuable points supporting the gist of my reasons for bringing the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), from the Opposition Front Bench, committed a Labour Government to addressing the issue of early legal advice on housing. I thank other hon. Members who are no longer in their places but who made valuable points, drawing on their experience in the House.

The debate is about a fundamental issue of access to justice. I felt that the Minister made positive points about the amount of money going into legal aid and early legal advice, and new initiatives to make such advice and support more accessible, but I am concerned that, when the situation is looked at from the ground, there are still massive gaps, and there is inadequate provision, given the level of need in the country's housing crisis: £100 million for early advice does not go very far, because I assume that it would include translation costs, which the Minister mentioned, representation in court and so on. It is good to know that the existence of deserts of provision is being addressed, with one new contract being let, but that still does not deal with the number of people queuing for advice and being turned away because there is not adequate provision. Organisations and legal firms are also going under, or ending relevant work; those skills and that knowledge are being lost for lack of funding—funding that would be for people who would never be able to pay for legal advice and assistance.

The Minister asserted that a not insubstantial sum is being paid through legal aid for housing matters. As hon. Members have eloquently said in support of my

arguments, that might be compared with the cost to the public purse of homelessness and the sort of disrepair that means people, including children, must go into hospital with severe asthma due to very bad damp in their accommodation. If people in those situations were able to obtain early legal advice landlords might be forced to address the issue before it became a health crisis. That is the cost to the public purse of homelessness—and there are social care, stress and mental health costs when families are in acute housing need.

The Minister talked about new housing. We have said time and again in the House that the level of funding for truly affordable social rented housing from the Government is nothing. What is being provided is coming from local authorities and housing associations, from other resources—capital that should be spent in other areas. It is the first time since the early 1920s that a UK Government have spent nothing on social rented housing. By the way, the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 does not address street homelessness. It provides, without any resources, for additional local authority duties that may help to prevent homelessness. In itself it is no bad thing but it does not address the present crisis. I ask the Government, so that we may address, substantially, the fundamental issue of the lack of access to justice in housing, to re-provision early advice under legal aid, and carry out a serious review of all legal aid for housing issues.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered housing and access to legal aid.

3.28 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Violence and Harassment at Work

[DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

4 pm

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered violence and harassment at work.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and to be able to lead this very timely debate. It is timely because in just 12 days' time the Minister, and indeed the Government, will have a unique opportunity to act in support of the unbelievable courage of thousands—probably millions—of women across the globe who have spoken out as part of the #MeToo campaign about sexual harassment that they have endured at work.

Such women include Zelda Perkins, here in the UK, who spoke out against sexual harassment perpetrated by Harvey Weinstein. That took raw courage—something that the Women and Equalities Committee has seen in so many of the submissions to our current inquiries on sexual harassment. In just 12 days' time, on 28 May, the International Labour Organisation will meet in Geneva to discuss a new possible global law: an ILO convention on ending violence and harassment in the world of work. The convention is an opportunity to move from #MeToo to #TimesUp, and to ensure that the world of workers is better protected.

As a member of the International Labour Organisation, the UK has not only a right to be there, but a right to support that important work, and to speak out and urge others to do the same. I hope that today's debate will give the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who is my neighbour, the opportunity to update the House on the Government's position and progress on this important issue. The Government have an immensely proud record of acting globally to tackle violence perpetrated against women around the world. This is yet another opportunity to take forward that clearly articulated strategy to take action against the form of violence that affects more women than any other: violence and harassment at work.

I thank CARE International—the Co-operative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere—for its support in preparing for today's debate, and I highlight the incredible work that team does and their professional insight into how we can address these issues. The Women and Equalities Committee first considered the issue of sexual harassment back in 2016, shortly after we were established, and around the same time that the International Labour Organisation started its work on a worldwide convention. The ILO should be applauded. When other organisations were, frankly, still in denial about the most prevalent form of violence against women, the ILO was doing the necessary preparatory work for this month's meeting.

Here in the UK, the prevalence of sexual harassment is in no doubt. More than three quarters of respondents to the Equality and Human Rights Commission's recent survey reported experiencing sexual harassment at work, and in 2016 research by the TUC and the Everyday Sexism Project found that more than half of women in the UK had experienced sexual harassment at work—a figure that rises to two thirds for young women in particular. Since our initial work, the Women and Equalities

Committee, which I chair, has launched two further inquiries into these issues: one on sexual harassment of women and girls in public places, and one on sexual harassment in the workplace. Our initial work was on sexual harassment in schools.

Thanks to the tenacity of CARE International and other organisations, we also have evidence on how these issues affect women similarly around the world—those women who make the clothes we wear, grow the food we eat or build the gadgets we depend on. We must ensure that the #MeToo movement does not go down in history as simply a flash in the pan, but as a significant milestone for the whole world on our path towards equality. To do that, we need to keep the pressure up and ensure that abuse and harassment is never part of anyone's job description, wherever they live in the world. The ILO conference gives us another opportunity to show real leadership, by tackling an issue that affects many millions of people in the UK and worldwide: violence and harassment at work.

It has been interesting to see in the ILO's work that tackling violence and harassment is not only a moral imperative; there is a very strong business case for it as well. In the same way that many UK businesses advocated for the supply chain reporting requirements in the Modern Slavery Act 2015, because they wanted all businesses to operate on a level playing field and for no one to have an advantage by ignoring abuses of people's rights, many businesses realised that a strong international convention on ending violence and harassment at work can help to ensure that the conditions in their factories, farms, pack houses and workshops within their supply chains are both decent and justifiable to the public.

The UK Fashion and Textile Association has already publicly supported the potential new ILO convention, and committed to working with the British Retail Consortium and others to promote the convention among its members. That is very important support. Businesses know that it is increasingly important to get human rights issues correct, and it was clear from the CBI's response to the Committee's recent inquiry into sexual harassment in the workplace that they understand that for the UK. I know that the CBI will support other employers' associations taking an equally positive view, and I hope that it will continue to encourage others to see the merit in such a convention.

In addition, there has also been considerable research showing that harassment and violence at work has considerable costs for business. CARE International conducted research last year in Cambodian garment factories and found that more than 30% of the women who worked there had faced sexual harassment within the previous year while at work. Not only is that wholly despicable, but the research showed that such harassment directly leads to lower productivity, revenue loss and missed days of work, costing the industry many millions of pounds and dollars a year. Clearly, that cost gets added to the cost of the goods that end up in the shops.

What specifically are we asking the Minister—my hon. Friend and near neighbour—and his Department to do regarding the International Labour Conference? First, we want to see a convention, and we need to see it supported by a detailed recommendation. Only through that approach can we ensure that whatever is adopted will be legally and morally binding on many countries—including, of course, the UK.

Without the international legal status of a convention, we will frankly only be making a polite request to countries to improve how they tackle these issues. With a convention, countries have to be committed to taking steps to put in place an effective framework. They might drag their feet or attempt to ignore the problem, but a convention means that they have to answer on a regular basis to the International Labour Conference, and to the many millions of men and women in their own countries, whether via the workforce or the whole population in an election. If they are a country that exports to the UK, Europe or other nations, they can also be held to account by business and ultimately, and importantly, by our consumers.

It might appear to us in the UK that if there is a convention that addresses the issue in more formal workplaces, we will have dealt with the problem, but in many countries around the world only a tiny proportion of the workforce work in such formal workplaces. In India, for example, more than 80% of the female workforce are in the informal sector. In countries such as Nepal the figure rises to more than 95%. The convention needs to cover not only women who work in formal workplaces, but those who work outside those workplaces. I hope that the Minister can give some indication of the Government's understanding of that necessity within the convention and say that they will be supporting that approach. In this country, an increasing number of workers are self-employed and I am sure that Members would not wish to see the mere lack of a traditional workplace used as an excuse to avoid responsibility for women being harassed by their de facto employers.

Similarly, we need a convention to be clear on the responsibility of companies down their international supply chains. That is an issue that the UK has a great deal of experience in driving through as a positive approach. The UK led on fighting modern slavery by making businesses aware of the importance of the supply chain in that approach. That is why I am hoping that when the Minister responds today he will be able to add some flavour of how the Government might be able to help other members of the International Labour Organisation to effectively put in place that sort of convention and give it maximum impact for women in their countries.

Even in the UK, where we have a relatively strong legal framework for dealing with harassment and violence, many women still suffer, so I ask the Minister to think about perhaps the one third of countries that have no such laws in place. Let us all be clear that a new convention can only be part of a much bigger picture for tackling the appalling treatment of people in the workplace. It is an essential part, but only part of an overall solution. We also need to see civil society and people in general challenge the norms that make it hard to speak out when one person suffers from, or sees, sexual harassment in the workplace. The #MeToo campaign has catalysed opinion and raised the issue to the top of not only the domestic agenda but the world agenda. The Minister and his Department have a real opportunity to take that catalyst for change and help turn it into lasting change for so many people around the world.

I mentioned CARE International research on the costs of harassment in Cambodia, but that has to be part of a wider campaign to help women understand what sexual harassment is and why they should no longer have to stand for it, and to help employers face

up to and understand the problems it causes and how widespread it is. Our Select Committee heard evidence this morning from a number of different organisations that are working in the UK to try to make it clearer to people in the workplace what sexual harassment is. We have some of the best and most developed laws in the world on equality and employment protection. That the natural acceptance of sexual harassment is still part and parcel of the price of being employed in 2018 Britain is appalling. There is still a need for a great deal of work. How much greater are the issues in those countries that do not have those legal frameworks, do not have equality and human rights commissions, and do not have that very real sense of fairness and justice that we have in our country? It is an enormous issue and I am very pleased that the International Labour Organisation is so far ahead in finding a way of engaging Governments around the world in resolving this.

As parliamentarians, we all know that this year is an exceptionally important year for our Parliament, as the centenary of the introduction of women's suffrage. Many of us were there when the statue of Millicent Fawcett was unveiled a couple of weeks ago—the first sculpture of a woman in Parliament Square. She is holding a banner that says, "Courage calls to courage everywhere". It can never have been a better statement to make than as part of this debate today.

We need the Minister to call to courage everywhere when he or his officials attend the International Labour Conference at the end of this month, so that we can send a very strong message that the UK wants to protect women's rights—not just here in the UK or when it comes to the campaigns that we are known for internationally, such as combating violence against women in areas of conflict or female genital mutilation, but also in ensuring that women no longer have to face violence and harassment in their work. We are expecting a truly effective global convention to emerge from the proceedings in Geneva that has the full weight of support from the UK Government behind it—not just from the Minister's Department, but from the Foreign Office and beyond—and for this Government to continue to lead the way in extolling the rights of women to enjoy equality around the world, by ensuring that workplaces are safe for every woman, everywhere.

4.16 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse):** It is a great pleasure to serve in front of a fellow Liverpudlian, Mr Hanson, and, unusually, to appear in a debate where the majority of Members present are native Liverpudlians. It cannot happen that often, but perhaps it will happen more often in future. I also congratulate my neighbour and right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this important debate, and on the leadership that she has shown on the issue recently. She has invested an enormous amount of political capital and energy into driving the agenda and pushing it up the political priority list; she is to be commended for that.

The Government take this matter extremely seriously. We welcome the inquiries by the Women and Equalities Committee into sexual harassment in the workplace and in public places, and the International Labour Organisation's initiative on ending violence and harassment in the world of work. We all have a responsibility to

[*Kit Malthouse*]

bring an end to inequality and injustice and to do that, we must work together across gender, social, political and national divides.

Sexual harassment can have a significant impact on those who are subjected to it. Nobody should be subjected to unwanted conduct of a sexual nature or be put in a compromising situation, and the law in the UK on harassment, sexual assault and rape is clear. Whether it is in the workplace, on the street, or part of domestic or sexual abuse, unwelcome advances that intimidate, degrade or humiliate are an abuse of power. The simple truth is that sexual harassment, in any situation, is unacceptable.

Workplace harassment is unlawful under the Equality Act 2010, which provides a remedy for harassment specifically in employment and other paid work, the provision of services, the exercise of public functions, the occupation, disposal or management of premises, education and associations such as private clubs. The Government believe that the criminal law also provides protection against violence and harassment for both men and women in the working environment and elsewhere. However, we keep the legislation under review to ensure it works as intended, and on all these matters we await with interest the outcome of the Select Committee inquiries.

On an international basis, we know that violence and harassment is a crucial barrier to women's economic engagement and to gender equality worldwide. We know that if women had the same role in labour markets as men, up to an estimated \$28 trillion, or 26%, could be added to global GDP in 2025—but we also know that it is not about the economic argument alone. Violence and harassment of women is an endemic human rights abuse, which prevents women from reaching their potential and living the life that they choose.

We have a responsibility to act as a global leader. We have strong laws on violence and harassment in the UK, but as my right hon. Friend said, many countries around the world do not have such protections. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has been clear that we should be proud to put British values on this issue at the centre of our international development work. She has launched a global call to action on gender equality and has put women's economic empowerment at the heart of her Department's economic development strategy.

We are working to tackle violence against women and girls around the world. Through our "What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls" programme, we are working in 12 countries across Africa and Asia to demonstrate the economic cost of violence and to understand the most effective approaches to prevention. The programme will reach up to 100,000 people worldwide. In Bangladesh, it involves working with textile workers to address violence against female garment workers in four factories in Dhaka. It provides workplace training to male and female workers to raise awareness and build skills, and works with managements to develop workplace politics and systems to address violence.

We are putting the economic empowerment of women and girls at the heart of the Department for International Development's economic development strategy, which was launched earlier this year. It focuses on trade as an engine for poverty reduction and investment in sectors

that can unlock growth. All our economic development work will tackle gender discrimination and will deliver safer, more secure work with higher returns for women. We are having a real impact: between 2011 and 2015, we helped 36.4 million women gain access to financial services and helped 3 million women to improve their land and property rights across the world.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke rightly spoke about our stance at the ILO convention in Geneva later this year. The Government are committed to ending violence and harassment against workers worldwide. I assure her that we are fully engaged in discussions at the International Labour Organisation to develop measures that, if agreed, would provide an international legal framework in this area. My officials recently met CARE International, the CBI and the TUC to hear their views on the proposed measures. They will be attending the ILO conference in Geneva later this month for the first of two committee discussions on the proposed instrument.

The Government are already in a strong position to champion the need for international provision—particularly in the light of our leadership on modern slavery and gender-based violence initiatives. We recognise that there is a potential benefit in closing the gap in international law. In negotiating a new instrument, the UK will be looking for sufficient alignment with UK criminal and civil protections, on which the UK is already in a strong position. The definitions and scope of any instruments need to be reasonable and justifiable for all parties, and they must allow for practical implementation and enforcement. Our stance generally is constructive, and we are listening.

**Mrs Miller:** My hon. Friend the Minister is choosing his words very carefully in talking about the negotiations and discussions that will be going on towards the end of the month. He is talking about the development of an instrument, but in my remarks I clearly said it is important to have a convention, which would have far more weight than recommendations. Will the Government support a convention?

**Kit Malthouse:** As I say, we are going to the conference with an open mind about what may come from it. We are generally supportive of the initiative on ending violence and harassment at work, which the ILO is undertaking. We need to be assured that what is produced is consistent with British practice and law, and is justifiable. Much of the devil of that work will be in the detail—particularly on some of the definitions. We definitely support an international push—we can assist it in ways other than just having an international initiative—to improve the situation of workers across the globe.

The UK is proud to be a global leader in efforts to eradicate violence against women and girls in all its forms, including through our leadership on efforts to eradicate modern slavery—one of the worst forms of abuse. I am proud that, in my time as deputy mayor for policing, I produced the first ever violence against women and girls strategy in a global capital city. That work was commended by the United Nations.

Everyone should be able to go to work without fear of violence or harassment, no matter who they are, where they work or what they do. The Government will continue to press for real progress through instruments

such as the sustainable development framework and organisations such as the ILO, to help make this a reality worldwide.

*Question put and agreed to.*

**David Hanson (in the Chair):** I would normally commence the next debate in these circumstances, but unfortunately the Minister is not here, for obvious reasons—the debate starts at 4.30 pm. I therefore have to suspend the sitting until 4.30 pm.

4.25 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Fortified Flour

4.30 pm

**Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid to prevent spina bifida and anencephaly.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, in this important debate on the potential for the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid to prevent neural tube defects. Every week in this country two children are born with a neural tube defect, most commonly spina bifida and anencephaly, and every day two pregnancies are terminated as a result of the diagnosis of such conditions in the womb.

The neural tube is the structure in the embryo that becomes the brain and the spinal cord. It should close between the 18th and 28th days after conception. Failure of the neural tube to close completely and properly leads to conditions such as spina bifida, affecting brain development, mobility, and bladder and bowel dysfunction—other right hon. and hon. Members have personal experience of that and will talk with great knowledge about it—and anencephaly, a fatal condition in which the brain does not develop.

In 1991 a seminal piece of research on prevention of neural tube defects for the vitamin study group of the Medical Research Council by Professor Sir Nicholas Wald showed conclusively that supplementing the diets of women with folic acid, a naturally occurring nutrient found in spinach, liver or Marmite, prior to conception and during the first trimester of pregnancy could reduce the incidence of NTDs by up to 70%. In response to the data, the Conservative Government at the time introduced new guidelines that recommended that all women should take supplements of folic acid prior to conception and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

Eighty-one other countries around the world, however, including the United States, Brazil, Australia, South Africa, Nigeria, Indonesia, Argentina and Canada, took a far bolder position, mandating the fortification of flour and flour-based products in their countries with folic acid as a public health intervention for whole societies. They did so having recognised the data and the long-established fact that at least 40% of pregnancies are unplanned, so NTDs might develop in the womb often even before those women realise that they are pregnant.

The recommendation of voluntary supplementation in our country led to an initial increase in the number of women taking folic acid before conception. The proportion went up to 35% in 1999, but by 2012 it had started to fall back, to just 31%, with much lower numbers seen in the more deprived socioeconomic sectors of society and in black and minority ethnic communities. Among pregnant women aged less than 20, on average just 6% supplement their diet before conception.

In short, the position that we have taken in our country under successive Governments has led to increasing health inequalities, with poorer, more marginalised and younger women having greater risk of their children being born with spina bifida or other conditions. By contrast, in the United States, which in 1998 started mandatory fortification of rye and wheat flour, and in 2016 introduced a new programme to fortify corn flour so as to target the Hispanic population, we have seen a

[Owen Smith]

reduction in NTD pregnancies of almost 30%. In Canada, one study of the prevalence of NTDs showed a drop from 4.56 births per 1,000 to 0.76 per 1,000 after fortification. Had we in this country followed the same route as Canada or the US, we would have seen 2,000 fewer pregnancies with a neural tube defect between 1998 and 2012. That is a sobering thought for the advisory committee in the UK to consider.

In fact, the scientific evidence in the case for fortification is not really contested. That is why the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition to this Government and previous ones—it used to be called COMA, the Committee on the Medical Aspects of Food Policy, but understandably changed its name—back in 2000 responded to the evidence and to the US move by recommending that our country should go down the route of mandatory fortification. SACN repeated that recommendation in 2006, in 2009 and in July of last year.

The most recent SACN report, surveying all the evidence available around the world about the benefits and the possible adverse consequences of folic acid fortification, stated:

“Conclusive evidence from randomised controlled trials...has shown that folic acid supplementation during the early stages of pregnancy can reduce the risk of the fetus developing neural tube defects”.

It goes on to maintain its view, expressed consistently by scores of scientific advisers to the committee over the years, that Britain should be fortifying our flour to prevent NTDs. The key question as far as I am concerned—not as a clinician or expert, but as someone who understands the value of evidence-based policy making—is this: why have this Government and previous Governments not acted on the advice and the evidence to take similar steps in our country?

The principal excuse offered by Ministers is that the evidence is mixed and that some studies have shown some possible risks associated with having higher levels of folic acid or folates in our bodies. In particular, two risks have been talked about: first, that higher levels of folates may mask vitamin B12 deficiencies in individuals, possibly leading to anaemia and neurological damage; and secondly, that higher doses of folic acid might run the risk of increasing the likelihood of certain cancers. As far as I can see, however, all the evidence and the science produced over the intervening 25 years have largely debunked such concerns.

The SACN has looked at all the evidence in last year’s review and previous ones and stated, on the issue of B12, that folic acid intakes up to 1 mg per day are not associated with neurological impairment in older people with low vitamin B12 status. The most recent SACN review stated that

“studies of folic acid supplementation and observational studies, indicate either no relationship with cognitive decline or a lower risk associated with higher folate status.”

It goes on to note:

“The prevalence of vitamin B12 deficiency with or without anaemia did not increase after mandatory fortification in the USA.”

Since the SACN provided that evidence, a further, critical study has been done by Professor Sir Nicholas Wald, who produced the original research suggesting the use of folic acid in flour, and Professor Sir Colin Blakemore, who is well known to right hon. and hon. Members. The study shows definitively that there

is no evidential base for the suggestion of a maximum tolerable level for folic acid. The question of it masking vitamin B12 is therefore no longer taken seriously by the scientific community in our country or overseas as a reason for not introducing folic acid into flour.

On the potential connection between high folate levels and overall cancer risk, again I quote the SACN’s latest review:

“Findings from the different study types are inconsistent but overall do not suggest an adverse association. RCTs”—randomised controlled trials—

“show no effect of folic acid supplementation on overall cancer risk. The MTHFR genetic studies suggest higher folate concentrations reduce overall cancer risk.”

Again, observed data from America, Canada and other societies do not show any adverse effects of increased cancer risk.

Support for the notion of mandatory fortification comes not just from our country or the SACN, but from a volume of organisations that I shall reference at some length: Shine, the brilliant spina bifida and hydrocephalus charity in this country; the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists; the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health; the Royal College of Midwives; the British Maternal and Fetal Medicine Society; the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare; the British Dietetic Association; the Governments in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, where only last year the Scottish Government said that they wished to introduce mandatory fortification but were unable to do so on a Scotland-only basis; the chief medical officers in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland; Public Health England; Public Health Wales; NHS Health Scotland; Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland; the Faculty of Public Health; the Food Standards Agency; Food Standards Scotland; Colin Blakemore; Nick Wald; Jeff Rooker; and me.

There are many people who think this is a very clear case where the evidence should lead to a policy change. Why do the Government not agree with their own advisers and with the overwhelming majority of scientific opinion? Why, in the light of the evidence, do they appear to have dragged their feet—not just this Government, but the previous Labour Government and, indeed, the Conservative Administration before that?

On 2 May, in response to a written question from my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) on the case of mandatory fortification, the Minister said:

“No assessment has been made of potential merits of adding folic acid to flour on pregnant women or children.”

That seems to be slightly at odds with what I have been saying for the past 10 minutes—that there seems to be a lot of evidence in support of it. He went on to say that the recent SACN report, which was published in July 2017,

“made recommendations in respect of folate levels and developing fetuses. Ministers are currently considering the issue of mandatory fortification and will set out their position in due course.”

We find ourselves here because I am looking for the Minister to set out the Government’s position in due course. They have had a quarter of a century to mull over the position, in the light of the evidence. I know the Minister, who I have great regard for, is a man of action. I look forward to him setting out the Government’s case and getting on with it.

4.42 pm

**Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) on securing this important debate and on the eloquent and cogent way that he set out the case for the fortification of flour with folic acid.

When the facts are set out and the evidence is adduced, it is a very compelling case. It is all the more surprising, when one hears the weighted evidence of the arguments in favour of it, that something has not yet been done in this country to ensure the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid. The hon. Gentleman said that that has happened in many major countries across the world with vast populations. He mentioned Brazil, the United States and Canada; they are big countries with very strong regulatory regimes in which this practice has been carried out. Therefore, there have been multiple opportunities to have all the scientific evidence evaluated and to have all the upsides and downsides considered. It is very clear that the upsides are so massive that they require this country to follow suit. It is a shame that we are not yet in a position in this country to have mandatory fortification of flour.

It has been 27 years since the Medical Research Council published its research demonstrating that supplementing women's diets with folic acid before the early stages of pregnancy reduced the chances of the pregnancy being affected by neural tube defects. That was in 1991. It was in 1990 that my son, Andrew, was born with spina bifida. Very soon after he was born, we became experts in the whole area of spina bifida: the reasons for it, how it develops and all the rest of it. Even back then, the great Professor Norman Nevin, who was an expert in the field in Belfast and did a lot of research, was a massive advocate for the mandatory fortification of flour, even before it was widely known about. He wanted to ensure that young parents who were planning to have children were better educated about the need to take folic acid and the general low levels of folates in the adult population and young people generally, because it was a massive problem and would store up big problems in future.

The reality is that as a result of not taking those measures, children are born with spina bifida or anencephaly. Children need not be born with those conditions if the parents have the right information and the mothers take folic acid at the appropriate time. The evidence shows, and it has been spelled out already, that it is too late once pregnancy has started. Many pregnancies are unplanned; many people even today, in 2018—never mind back in 1990 when my son was born—have no awareness of the need to take folic acid. They think it is something rather exotic—why on earth would they even consider such a thing? Even the name sounds a little strange.

People do not take the necessary steps and, as a result, children are born with severe disabilities. That presents great challenges to them, and often life-changing effects on their families. Often, as sadly was the case for my son, these children do not live a long life. Our boy died when he was eight years of age. In the process of his short but extremely rewarding and rich life, he underwent numerous procedures in hospital and numerous hospitalisations, sometimes lengthy. That had an impact on him, his family and his siblings.

The reality is that for all those children who are born with spina bifida and who live with it and are treated, many other children in the womb who are diagnosed with having a neural tube defect are never born. The hon. Member for Pontypridd and I recently hosted an excellent meeting in Portcullis House, which a lot of people attended. One of the things that came out of that was that, sadly, it appears that in this country we effectively deal with this problem simply by terminating foetuses that are diagnosed with a neural tube defect. That is how the vast bulk of these foetuses are treated.

It is a terrible thing that otherwise healthy babies and foetuses are in this situation as a result of a lack of action by society, successive Governments and by all of us, who have not done what other countries have done, which could be done at very little cost with no scientific downside, and which would reap enormous benefits for everybody. This is something that we need to take very seriously.

Over the years, my wife and I have done some work to try to educate people about the need to take folic acid. My wife, very bravely, did a number of television interviews when Andrew was alive. He even appeared on the television programmes. The process of education and telling people is not cutting through. It is not doing the job. It is not reaching the people it needs to reach at the time it needs to reach them, before they fall pregnant. We need to step up to the plate.

I will not repeat the scientific evidence, which has been laid out well by the hon. Gentleman and the groups that support this necessary move. There is a lack of understanding. People sometimes get nervous about the idea of adding things to food for public health purposes. I understand all that, but we already add things to flour and to water—we already make interventions where that is important and necessary. A lot of scientific evidence has been produced. I was struck that Professor Blakemore and the other experts who came to the event we held in Portcullis House said that, scientifically, absolutely nothing more needs to be proved or evaluated. All the evidence is there; we now require action on the basis of that evidence.

I simply add my voice to the plea for the Government to act on the advice of their own Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition and listen to the voices of all those who speak in favour of this measure. They should listen in particular to the voice of Shine which, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, is a fantastic organisation that does tremendous work to help kids with spina bifida and hydrocephalus, and parents who have lost children. As I learned over those many years of intense engagement with clinicians and others, who often said, "Well, you tell us how Andrew's feeling, because you know better," parents do know. The Government need to listen to parents and potential parents—people who lost children in the womb or, totally understandably, felt unable to have a child with that condition.

This is a very important issue. It does not seem to me to be taken seriously enough, primarily because, relatively speaking, not a lot of children are born with spina bifida nowadays in the United Kingdom. As I said, I think that is partly because a lot of children with the condition are simply terminated in the womb. If it prevents even one or two children from being born with spina bifida who otherwise would have been born with the condition, this will have been a step well worth taking.

Several hon. Members rose—

**David Hanson (in the Chair):** Order. I intend to call the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), at 5.10 pm. Three hon. Members wish to speak before that, so will they split the remaining time accordingly? I call Stuart C. McDonald.

4.52 pm

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) for introducing this debate and for setting out the facts and the science so comprehensively. I entered the ballot to try to secure a debate on this topic, and I was unsuccessful in persuading the Leader of the House to allow a debate in Government time, so I am pleased that he came up trumps. I also thank both him and the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), who made an incredibly powerful speech, for hosting the recent Folic Acid Awareness Day event in conjunction with Shine. I was very sorry to miss that.

Both hon. Members mentioned Shine's fantastic work, but let me mention another charity. I recently battled through the heat of the London marathon to raise funds for two charities, one of which was Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Scotland. SBH Scotland is a fantastic charity based in Cumbernauld whose specialist staff work across Scotland and are committed to providing a lifetime of information, support and projects to all those affected by spina bifida, hydrocephalus and allied conditions. It, too, is a strong champion of mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid.

Like pretty much everyone else in the Chamber, I believe we are a long way past the point at which mandatory fortification became the right option. Intake of folic acid has been proven to reduce the number of pregnancies affected by neural tube defects, of which spina bifida is the most common. The Government themselves recommend that women who are planning a pregnancy or are within the first 12 weeks of their pregnancy should take a daily 400 microgram supplement of folic acid. However, only 31% of women take the correct dosage, and many do not begin until they are pregnant, when it is too late. We must keep in mind that 45% of pregnancies are unplanned—in those cases, there is no possibility to plan ahead. Overall, 75% of women of childbearing age across the UK are at increased risk of having a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect due to having lower than the recommended level of folic acid.

There is no evidence to suggest that mandatory fortification would be anything other than beneficial, given that recent research, which the hon. Member for Pontypridd expertly set out, shows there is no longer a basis for setting an upper limit on folic acid intake. As we have heard, the argument is further strengthened by the experience in at least 81 countries, including the USA, Canada and Australia. Importantly, as I understand it, no country that has taken the step of mandating the fortification of flour has gone on to reverse it. It is clearly time for the UK to follow suit.

The issue is particularly pressing in Scotland, where proportionately more children are born with spina bifida than in other parts of the UK and folic acid levels are

particularly low—lower than in the UK as a whole, which itself has low levels by international standards. As we have heard, the Scottish Government have supported compulsory fortification of flour for many years. Unfortunately, although power over the issue is devolved to Scotland, the advice from Food Standards Scotland is that realistically, given the way in which the flour and milling industries are structured, a response is better delivered UK-wide. That is what we unite to call for today.

The Holyrood Government, the Welsh Government, the Northern Ireland Department of Health, the Food Standards Agency, Public Health England, the British Medical Association, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition and all the royal colleges under the sun are on board. The science points overwhelmingly in favour of mandatory fortification, but surely, when we listen to the individuals and families affected by neural tube defects—spina bifida and allied conditions, of which the right hon. Member for Belfast North gave an example—that overwhelming case becomes undeniable. I hope that the Government listen to the science and to the families affected, and act quickly.

4.56 pm

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) on securing this important debate and, as always, making an excellent case in favour of the fortification of flour and the science behind it. I also thank him and the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) for organising the recent event in Parliament with the charity Shine, among others. Shine has worked for many years alongside my constituents, the Walbyoffs, on whose behalf I speak.

I will use my short contribution to give a voice to Paul and Liz, whose eldest daughter, Sara, lives with spina bifida. My hon. Friend for Pontypridd explained comprehensively how the conditions caused by a low level of folic acid during a mother's pregnancy cause neural tube defects in an unborn child. Sara was diagnosed with the condition weeks before the birth of the family's second child, Alis. Paul and Liz tell me that, had they known that earlier, Liz would have increased her dosage of folic acid during her pregnancy. Indeed, mums such as Liz would have benefited from the extra folic acid boost that would have come from the fortification of flour. The evidence suggests that, in as many as three out of four cases, that could be the difference between a baby being born with a neural tube defect and not.

Like many families across the country with a personal connection to the debate, Paul and Liz cannot understand why the UK has not introduced mandatory fortification of flour. Other food products, such as cereal, are fortified with folic acid; the rationale for excluding flour from fortification is unclear. There is clearly strong support for that among members of the medical profession. David Bailey, the chair of the BMA council in Wales, described mandatory fortification to prevent spina bifida as

“an important and cost effective public health measure.”

On behalf of Paul and Liz, I urge the Government to look at this sensible proposal carefully and to act. As the right hon. Member for Belfast North said, all the evidence is there; all that is needed is action. I hope that the Government listen to this debate.

4.58 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) on bringing this debate to Westminster Hall. I congratulate him on presenting his case so well, as he did at the awareness day that some of us were able to get down to. As the Democratic Unionist party spokesperson for health, I am aware of this issue and very supportive of the fortification of flour.

All the speeches we have heard were tremendous. I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) for telling a very personal story. Personal stories in these debates always carry substantial weight. His was a story that he and his wife have walked, and although we might have known something about this issue, we have heard a whole lot more. I commend him on that and assure him of our support. He knows that it has always been there for him, but on days when we tell personal stories we feel it a bit more.

When my parliamentary aide was pregnant, we got a surprise. In the mornings when she was under a little pressure, instead of shouts of “coffee” coming from her desk she would ask for water. By the time of her second baby, we all knew what “no coffee” meant—baby on board. You can imagine the apprehension I felt, Mr Hanson, on a Friday morning when I said to the staff in the office, “Girls, who’s for coffee?” If they said no, I knew they did not want coffee, but was there anything they wanted to tell me? That, however, is by the way. Why did my aide do that? It is simple: she told me, “Coffee makes the baby’s heart beat faster, so I need to stay away from it.” I wanted to make a contribution to the debate because she has lived through this.

Almost every mother I have ever known, as soon as they have that pregnancy test, has made changes to their lifestyle. They do it automatically, and in many cases right away, for the sake of the baby. They stop having alcohol and start on vitamins, reduce caffeine and increase their fruit and veg. By doing that, they naturally create—to use an Ulsterism—a better wee home for their child, which is what the mother is trying to achieve.

This is a personal story from my aide. They are told by the doctor to take folic acid, and of course they do, because it is important, but the problem is that ladies who have been on contraceptive pills find their folic acid store completely depleted. If they have not taken folic acid before pregnancy, it may be too late. With approximately 40% of UK pregnancies estimated to be unplanned, that is certainly an issue, so we look to the Minister for a good response. I mean this respectfully: larger ladies who have a higher body mass index should be taking more folic acid than the usual pregnancy dose. That is not talked about widely, but it is important to put on record how important folic acid is for anyone who is pregnant, and perhaps those showing signs more than others.

I read an excerpt from the NHS Choices website regarding flour and folic acid that made things very clear to me. It describes how a randomised controlled trial from 1991 first indicated that taking 4 mg of folic acid during pregnancy—10 times the current recommended dose—could prevent about 80% of neural tube defects. On the basis of that trial, it was concluded that such

defects are due to a vitamin deficiency that needs correcting before pregnancy. However, it said that, despite campaigns, a study of nearly half a million women in England showed that less than a third took folic acid supplements before pregnancy. That tells me clearly that action is needed, and it is needed now.

**Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): On adding folic acid to flour, we have potentially been putting fluoride into water, and that has virtually no health benefits. That has only dental benefits, which are about lifestyle choice, and that is different from those suffering because they are not getting folic acid through their diet. It is great that this issue has been brought forward, and we should look to put folic acid into flour and ensure that everyone gets it, because there are no negative sides to that.

**Jim Shannon:** I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. We are already putting additives into many products we eat, to our benefit, and that is what we should be doing.

To return to taking folic acid supplements before pregnancy, of the half a million women in England surveyed, less than a third did so. The figures varied by age, with the highest use in women aged 35 to 39, of whom 38% took it before pregnancy, compared with only 13% of those aged 20 to 24 and 7% of those under 20. There was also a marked ethnic variation, with 35% of white women taking it compared with 20% of south Asian women and 18% of Afro-Caribbean women.

Just under two thirds of all women took supplements in early pregnancy, but the researchers say that that is already too late. The current strategy of encouraging women to take folic acid before pregnancy is inadequate and, in particular, putting younger women and minority groups at a disadvantage. People always talk about stats, but the fact of the matter is that they tell a story—and these stats tell a clear story. When women take folic acid before and during pregnancy, it makes a difference. However, there is clearly either no knowledge or not enough information about it. We look to the Minister and the Government to step forward and do what is right.

I would also like to mention that whenever people come to my office for benefit claims and I see what medication they are on, as we need to do—it must be the same for everybody’s offices—I find it surprising how many are, for different reasons, in receipt of folic acid. That is because folic acid helps to get their bodies back into kilter. That is important: folic acid has benefits not just for those who are pregnant but for those who are in ill health.

While I understand the Government’s reluctance to become a nanny state who enforce rather than guide, we should remember that flour fortification is not new. To white flour, the UK adds calcium, iron, thiamine and niacin to replace the nutrients stripped and discarded when the bran and germ are removed from the wheat grain. That was introduced after world war two to help improve the nation’s health. We did it then for that purpose, so why in 2018 can we not do it for the purposes we are presenting to the House today? I do not agree with the nanny state argument. Sometimes, Governments have to take the initiative and do things that are important.

[Jim Shannon]

Today, milling is even more efficient at stripping the nourishing layers from the endosperm, which means that even less natural folate is left in white flour than there was when replacing other lost B vitamins was deemed necessary. There is, therefore, a greater need today for folic acid than there was in the past—even after world war two, when that was seen to be important.

I will conclude, because I am conscious of the timescale you gave us, Mr Hanson. The Government must consider this issue. I give my full support to the hon. Member for Pontypridd for bringing the debate forward, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North and other speakers. We have all come here with the same message, in an attempt to highlight this issue to the Government. Anything we can do to bring healthy babies into this world should be done without any delay. This seems to be a cost-effective way of helping mothers and their babies from the earliest opportunity. I am fond of the Minister, and he knows that. I look to him for a substantial response—no pressure whatsoever—on what we have proposed, with reasons.

5.8 pm

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and to take part in this debate, which has been profound and poignant so far. I thank the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), who gave an extremely good, well-researched, evidence-based case for the fortification of flour with folic acid. There is scientific evidence, and when we know that we can do the right thing, there is no reason not to do so. His case was strong, clinically based and backed by the royal colleges and practitioners we should be listening to.

We heard that every week two children are born with spinal neural tube defects and that, as a result of potential defects, many terminations occur. As someone who has experienced a number of miscarriages in my life, there is nothing more horrendous than losing a baby: you question every single thing that you have done and everything that you could have done. If something like this could make a difference for those individuals who find themselves in that traumatic situation and do not seek terminations and for those who have unexplained miscarriages, we should be doing it.

There is absolutely no cost that can be put on losing a baby that you very much want to have. Often the tragedy of it is that it is unexplained. It is not until it has happened four times—another issue that we must address—that there is even any research into why it might have happened, or happened repeatedly. There are many individuals who may be or have been affected, who might not even know that a simple step such as this could have made the difference. That is certainly a step we must take.

As we have heard, the scientific basis is there. The countries that are leading now and protecting their populations by fortifying their flour with folic acid—I say again, such a simple step—have found no adverse consequences. Those countries have implemented the policy over a long period of time; they are looking at the health benefits and finding that any concerns about health costs were unfounded. The research is unequivocal in that regard and must be listened to.

As has been noted, the Scottish and Welsh Governments have both written to the UK Health Secretary, urging him to take action and introduce mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid on a UK-wide basis, because that is what is required. I am often in debates where there is little consensus across the four nations, but this seems to be one of those unique debates in which we are all saying, “This has to happen,” from across parties and across nations. There seems absolutely no logical reason for not taking this matter forward timeously, to protect families from the trauma of that unexplained miscarriage or of finding out that they have a baby who is very sick, and perhaps having to have a termination that they never wanted, or a difficult discussion regarding how to care for a young child who they want to see reach their full potential and want to give all the love in the world to, but who will have medical complications throughout their life.

I thank the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) for an extremely profound and personal account in memory of Andrew. We must pay heed to people’s personal accounts. That is what must guide policy. They are real people who are being affected; we are talking about families, and we must do the right thing. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who has done a lot of fundraising in this regard—even running a marathon, which is something I commend him for doing, and unfortunately not something I will ever be able to do myself. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a health spokesperson for his party, made a good speech and asked important questions of the Minister, and the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) advocated excellently for her constituents. For once, we are singing from the same hymn sheet. These are small nudges that we can make—small changes that make such a great difference. I urge the Minister to act.

5.13 pm

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson; I think it is the first time I have had such a pleasure.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) for securing the debate and for his eloquent speech. As always, he showed his knowledge and passion on this important topic. I also thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who speaks for the Scottish National party and mentioned that the Scottish Government have looked at this policy and, as I understand the situation, concluded that it was impossible to bring in fortified flour on a Scotland-only basis because of the fluid nature of the UK food industry and the very fluid nature of flour. I therefore think it is definitely time that the UK Government looked at this issue again.

I thank the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) for his brave and personal speech, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and the hon. Members for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for their excellent contributions to the debate. Finally, I add my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), who raised this matter last week during Health and Social Care questions.

As we have heard, this issue has been on the table for decades now, and it is only right that it continues to be brought up at every possible opportunity. The UK Government continue their policy of voluntary folic acid supplementation for women of childbearing age, despite the evidence and the fact that the latest National Diet and Nutrition Survey states that 91% of women of childbearing age have a red blood cell folate level below the level estimated to lower the risk of NTDs. I therefore ask the Minister what he is doing to encourage women of childbearing age to take folic acid supplements. Additionally, what steps is his Department taking to ensure that women of childbearing age even know that they should take those supplements?

Incidentally, this was something that I was aware of when I was having my children 25 years ago. We think things have moved on, but my young researcher in my office said that she only found out about it when she was researching for this speech. So, the message is not out there—not everybody knows this information. The voluntary approach means that, more often than not, those who do not need the supplements will take them, whilst those most at risk will miss out. Young mothers and those from the most socioeconomically deprived areas are least likely to take supplements. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that these groups of women are included and reached?

I am sure that it will not come as a surprise to the Minister that as many as 40% of pregnancies are unplanned, and that means that many women will not have been taking supplements during the crucial phase, just before or just after conception. It therefore makes sense for flour to be fortified with folic acid, to ensure that women get the nutrients that they need in order to reduce the risk of NTDs. That already happens in over 80 countries worldwide, including the United States, Canada and Australia.

Currently, no countries in the European Union fortify their flour with folic acid. However, there is no legislation preventing any of them from doing so. Given the UK's research on this matter, I believe that they are waiting for us to lead the way, and as we have heard, I believe Scotland is probably doing just that. Why are the Government not therefore taking the opportunity to lead the way and reduce NTDs, not only in the UK but, in turn, across Europe? I understand and sympathise with concerns about adverse effects that this may have on the population. However, there really is no evidence to suggest that from other countries that have fortified their flour with folic acid for many years.

I also note the response of the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Mental Health and Inequalities from Health and Social Care questions last week:

“We have advice that if the intake of folic acid exceeds given levels, that can also bring health problems”.—[*Official Report*, 8 May 2018; Vol. 640, c. 537.]

However, the modelling undertaken by Food Standards Scotland in 2017 indicated that fortification at the recommended levels, with a capping of voluntary fortification and supplements, can achieve the reductions in NTD risk without increasing the number of people consuming the upper recommended limit. Has the Minister made any assessment of that finding, and could he stipulate where his advice is from? Finally, has the Minister's Department made any assessment in the last five years of the benefits of fortifying flour with folic acid?

From this afternoon's debate it is clear that there are benefits to the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid. I really do hope that the Minister will take all of this away with him today back to his Department and reconsider this policy—unless, of course, he is going to announce that he is going to fortify flour forthwith.

**David Hanson (in the Chair):** I call the Minister, Steve Brine.

5.19 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine):** Thank you, Mr Hanson. Should that be the miller, Steve Brine? I like the notion from the shadow Minister that the European Union is waiting for us to lead. That is a new concept.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) on securing the debate and I thank him for devoting it to an issue that I know he cares about. He works closely with Shine, which he mentioned and which was mentioned by others, and is based in his constituency. It does some fantastic work supporting people with spina bifida and anencephaly and their families. I have asked my officials to see if Shine will come in and see me as soon as possible. It is not a charity that I know, so I want to speak to and get to know its staff.

I hope I can reassure hon. Members a little bit—I suspect it will not be a lot—that the Government and those who provide us with expert independent advice are looking incredibly closely at all of this, as I will set out. I will say at the outset that I am sorry to disappoint the shadow Minister, but I cannot give the House an exclusive announcement today, I am afraid. However, I may be able to give some encouragement.

Part of the pregnancy advice currently provided to women is of course to take folic acid supplements. The consequences of folate deficiency in the general population are that pregnant women are at greater risk of giving birth to low birth-weight, premature babies with neural tube defects. Unless someone is pregnant or is thinking of having a baby, they should be able to get all the folate they need by eating a generally varied and balanced diet. Women who are trying to conceive, or who are likely to become pregnant, are advised to take a daily supplement of, we say, 400 micrograms of folic acid until the 12th week of pregnancy. They are also advised to increase their daily intake of folate by eating more folate-rich foods such as spinach and broccoli, which sounds lovely, and foods that are voluntarily fortified with folic acid such as, as has been said, a wide range of breakfast cereals.

As has been said by pretty much every Member who has spoken, around half of pregnancies are unplanned. Of those that are planned, it has been estimated that only half of all mothers take folic acid supplements or modify their diet to increase their folate intake. That is one of the main reasons behind the calls for mandatory fortification and is one of the reasons why the debate was called.

UK wheat flour is currently fortified with calcium, iron, niacin and thiamine in accordance with the Bread and Flour Regulations 1998—introduced under the last Labour Government—which apply in England, Scotland and Wales, with parallel regulations in Northern Ireland. This mandatory fortification is a domestic, not an EU,

[Steve Brine]

requirement and is done for public health reasons. It has the primary objective of restoring those nutrients lost during the milling process, with the exception of calcium, which is added in larger amounts than that lost.

To date, successive Governments have not considered that the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid is the best way of protecting public health and have instead promoted the use of supplements as part of a wide range of pre and post-conception advice to women of childbearing age. That may be merely stating the obvious of where we have come from, but it does not necessarily need to mean where we are headed.

While it may appear straightforward to just add folic acid to the existing mandatory flour fortification measures, a problem that arises with the proposal to move from the current advice of taking a measured supplement is of how to ensure that women are able to assess their folate intake if getting it from foods made from flour instead. Women in the targeted age group may not eat the relevant products in sufficient quantities.

We also want to consider the population's wider dietary advice, and to educate women to encourage them to achieve a greater folate intake by way of eating those folate-rich vegetables that I mentioned earlier, rather than relying on flour-containing foods, which may not be the best contributor to a balanced diet. It will be necessary to consider properly women's consumption of all wheat flour-containing products to fully understand the impact of any mandatory fortification on diet and folate intake levels. Additionally, we are aware that the universal fortification of flour with folic acid may not be readily accepted by the general public, especially when the measure is intended to benefit only a specific section of the population.

The aforementioned Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition—SACN; it was indeed called COMA—is a committee of independent experts on nutrition that provides advice to Public Health England, for which I have ministerial responsibility, and other Government agencies and Departments across the UK. It has recently updated the evidence on folic acid in response to a request from Food Standards Scotland, which was prompted by Scottish Ministers expressing a desire to proceed unilaterally with the mandatory folic acid fortification of flour north of the border.

In its most recent July 2017 report, SACN saw no reason to change its previous recommendations, made in 2006 and 2009, for mandatory folic acid fortification, to improve the folate status of women most at risk of NTD-affected pregnancies, provided that this is accompanied by restrictions on voluntary dietary fortification with folic acid. Again, this emphasises the need to fully understand all the sources of folate intake by women, to ensure that their health is protected as well as to protect their unborn children. The Wald paper, which is a new scientific paper published on 31 January this year in *Public Health Reviews*, has again raised this issue. However, the paper suggests that there should be no upper limit on folate intake, which would remove some of SACN's concerns.

The Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment—COT—is another independent scientific committee that provides

advice to the Government on, among other things, the safe upper levels for vitamins and minerals. The Wald paper was brought to the attention of COT by its chairman, and COT agreed to take forward for further consideration the issue of tolerable upper limits for folate. COT discussed a scoping paper in March this year and will have its first detailed discussion in July to see whether Wald's analysis of the data is correct and whether the original tolerable upper level recommendation is not appropriate. COT will then receive a second paper in September considering all of that and is hoping to be able to report its findings towards the end of this year.

I wanted to put that on the record because it is the advice I have been given, but I have to say that, frankly, I am the Minister, and that is not good enough for me. I want it sooner than that, so I have asked COT to come and see me by the end of this month to explain itself and to see whether we can move forward more quickly.

To conclude, I am moved by the testimonies given today. The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) is a gentleman and an excellent parliamentarian, and his speech about his son, Andrew, cannot have been an easy one to make. I thank him for putting those personal things on the record in the way he did. There are many issues to consider, but I wholeheartedly agree with the sentiment of the debate. I will do my utmost as the public health Minister, working with other colleagues across Government—this impacts on other Departments as well—to work through the issues to give the best effect to the aim of the debate as soon as we possibly can.

5.27 pm

**Owen Smith:** I thank the Minister for his response, but I have to say that I am disappointed by it. I am disappointed principally because I do not think he has taken the action that he could have on the basis of the evidence that has been presented both today and, more importantly, by the scientific community in our country and around the world over the past 25 years, as well as the lived experience of the 80-odd communities, societies and Governments around the world that have undertaken mandatory fortification with no evidence recorded in any studies of any of the potential adverse events in their populations that have been referred to in a few scientific papers.

The Minister concedes that the current process is not working because of low uptake of the advice and because so many pregnancies are unplanned. I am pleased that COT is looking at the Wald paper on tolerable upper limits and the evidence it presents that there is not one, because excess folic acid is excreted. However, I am intrigued to know—I will write to the Minister on this—whether COT has advised the Government not to introduce mandatory fortification and not to follow the advice from their other advisory body, SACN, formerly known as COMA. If it has not offered advice to that effect, I cannot understand where Ministers are getting the advice that tells them not to introduce mandatory fortification.

The only formal advice that Ministers have had from 2000 to 2017 is to do what all Members here and the scientific community have recommended and to get on with mandatory fortification. It is a mystery to me why the Government continue to suggest that there are serious scientific reasons for not doing it. I do not

believe that the Government have illustrated that and I do not think that the Minister illustrated that today; unfortunately, I do not think successive Ministers in all Governments have illustrated that.

Today has been a missed opportunity. However, I leave the Minister under no illusion that we will continue to raise this issue and to push for mandatory fortification. I look forward to debating it with him again in the future.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid to prevent spina bifida and anencephaly.

5.30 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Wednesday 16 May 2018

## DEFENCE

### Grant-in-kind

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb):** I have today laid before the House a departmental minute describing a package of spares for Challenger 2 Tanks that the UK intends to provide to the Royal Army of Oman. The value of the package is estimated at £0.997 million.

The provision of equipment is being made as a grant-in-kind. Following correspondence from the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee in 2016, Departments which previously treated these payments as gifts have undertaken to notify the House of Commons of any such grant-in-kind of a value exceeding £300,000 and explaining the circumstances: following Treasury approval the House is duly notified of this intention.

The grant-in-kind in this case is to the Royal Army of Oman. The equipment being granted by the UK will comprise surplus assemblies and line replaceable units for the repair and maintenance of Challenger 2 tanks. The provision of this equipment is a direct response to a request made by the Royal Army of Oman to the UK defence attaché in Oman and is in support of National Security Council objectives. Releasing this surplus equipment is consistent with wider defence policy to reduce the number of Challenger 2 in service.

The total cost of the proposed UK package is £0.997 million, including some minor transportation costs within the UK. Delivery from the UK to Oman will be conducted by the Royal Air Force of Oman and will be at no cost to the UK.

The UK is committed to assisting the Royal Army of Oman and the Government of Oman as it remains a key ally in the Gulf region. Contributing to the development of capable and well-led armed forces in Oman supports the Government's aim of enhancing regional stability, developing permanency in Oman and the wider Gulf and cementing our relationship with Oman for the future; this relationship is critical to UK national security.

All export and licensing requirements have been met and the equipment is expected to be delivered in May 2018.

[HCWS687]

## HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Building Safety

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire):** My predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) issued an update on building safety on 15 March 2018, *Official Report*, column 1018, in which he informed the House that a glazed, composite fire door from Grenfell Tower manufactured by Manse Masterdor, around five years ago, and marketed as meeting a 30-minute standard failed the test after approximately 15 minutes.

The Government immediately sought advice from the independent expert panel, which was appointed by this Government following the Grenfell Tower fire to advise on immediate measures needed to ensure building safety and to help identify other buildings of concern. The expert panel has consulted representatives from the Metropolitan police, the Government's chief scientific advisers, the National Fire Chiefs Council, and technical experts. Following this, the expert panel advised that the risks to public safety remained low and there was no change to the fire safety advice that the public should follow. As outlined in the statement on 15 March, further investigations, including testing have been taken forward in relation to flat front entrance doors manufactured by Manse Masterdor.

The National Fire Chiefs Council has advised the expert panel that the risk to public safety remains low. The expert panel has recognised that, based on the evidence, the risks to public safety have not changed significantly. However, as a result of our tests, they have concluded there is a performance issue with composite 30-minute flat fire doors that have been manufactured by Manse Masterdor, a company which ceased trading in 2014. These doors were manufactured by the company in such a way that the glazing and hardware components fitted would not consistently meet the 30 minutes of fire resistance in furnace tests required for these doors to meet the current building regulations guidance.

The National Fire Chiefs Council has advised the expert panel that buildings affected by this issue need to review their fire risk assessment to take into account this new information.

The expert panel's advice is:

Building owners with Manse Masterdor front entrance flat fire doors should review the fire risk assessment of their buildings to assess the overall fire risk and determine whether mitigations are needed.

The risk to public safety remains low.

Fire doors prevent the spread of fire and smoke and the performance deficiencies identified are different to risks from aluminium composite material cladding which assists the spread of fire.

All fire doors should be assessed regularly to make sure they are likely to meet the minimum standard.

The replacement of Manse Masterdor fire doors should take place using a risk-based approach.

Further testing of other suppliers should be undertaken to make sure the issues with manufacture are not wider than this single supplier's products.

The National Fire Chiefs Council has confirmed its previous advice that the risk to public safety is low and evidence does not suggest this has changed. It continues to advise that, in the event of a fire, people should follow existing fire procedures for the building. Residents should also test their smoke alarms regularly to ensure they work and ensure that their flat front door is fitted with a working self-closing device. All doors provide essential protection in a fire if they are properly closed.

I am therefore advising owners of buildings where Manse Masterdor composite front entrance 30-minute fire doors have been installed in flats, to review their buildings' fire risk assessments, and to consider how quickly these doors should be replaced.

The expert panel has published guidance for building owners who are replacing flat front entrance fire doors and this can be accessed from my Department's website:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/advice-for-building-owners-on-assurance-and-replacing-of-flat-entrance-fire-doors>.

My Department is writing to customers of Manse Masterdor identified in the company's records as having been supplied with 30-minute fire doors and is working closely with the Local Government Association, the National Housing Federation, the National Fire Chiefs Council and the industry response group to consider what further support building owners may require to assist with taking timely action.

In testing its product range Synseal Masterdor, the company that took over the operation from Manse Masterdor, has withdrawn its entire composite 30-minute fire door range and has notified all its customers of the

issues identified. Unlike the case of Manse Masterdor where the company is no longer trading, Synseal is a company still in operation. It is therefore working with trading standards to determine further action to ensure its products meet relevant standards, in line with usual good practice.

The expert panel endorses this approach with Synseal.

We are continuing our investigations into the wider fire door market, and intend to test fire doors from other door suppliers. This will form part of the work my Department takes forward to respond to the findings from Dame Judith Hackitt's review.

[HCWS686]

# Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 16 May 2018

## FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

### Topical Questions

*The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on 15 May 2018.*

T8. [905313] **Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): Residents of North Devon regularly raise with me their concerns about the continuing illegal international trade in wildlife and wildlife products. Will my right hon. Friend please update the House on how we are tackling that?

**Boris Johnson:** I can tell the House that this is a subject that arouses the grave concern of the entire British people. The illegal wildlife trade is currently worth

about £1.7 billion, and it is of course associated with many other criminal activities. That is why, in October, we are holding a global summit in London on that very matter, which I think will attract the interest of the world.

[Official Report, 15 May 2018, Vol. 641, c. 132.]

*Letter of correction from Boris Johnson.*

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) during Questions to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

The correct response should have been:

**Boris Johnson:** I can tell the House that this is a subject that arouses the grave concern of the entire British people. The illegal wildlife trade is currently worth **up to £17 billion**, and it is of course associated with many other criminal activities. That is why, in October, we are holding a global summit in London on that very matter, which I think will attract the interest of the world.

# ORAL ANSWERS

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# MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

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