

**Thursday
17 May 2018**

**Volume 641
No. 141**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 17 May 2018

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

US Tariffs: Steel and Aluminium

1. **Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on US tariffs on steel and aluminium. [905353]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Prime Minister and I continue to raise our concerns with President Trump and his Administration about the potentially damaging impact of tariffs on our steel and aluminium industries. We are working closely with the US and our EU partners to secure a permanent EU exemption to these tariffs.

Mrs Moon: Steel tariff exemptions are vital for Tata Steel. Many of my constituents work at Tata in Port Talbot in the next constituency along from mine. The exemption is welcome, but there are concerns about the US placing quotas on steel imports, which will have a major impact on the exports going not just from Britain but from Europe. How does the Secretary of State see himself protecting our export trade once we leave the European Union and do not have its negotiating power behind us?

Dr Fox: When it comes to protection post EU, we will have our own trade remedies measures. But of course the hon. Lady and her Labour colleagues voted against our being able to establish those when the legislation came to the House.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What is the Secretary of State doing with our partners to ensure that we do not suffer from diversionary dumping of steel as a result of what the US is doing?

Dr Fox: We want to see a permanent exemption so that we do not get into that position in the first place, but we have made it clear that we would operate with our European partners to ensure that we took any measures necessary that were proportionate and within international trade law to ensure that the situation that the hon. Gentleman describes would not happen.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The US President seems intent on undermining the World Trade Organisation's multilateral rules-based system. He is delaying the settlement of disputes by vetoing the appointment of judges to the appellate body and is using national security as a cover, in this case, for naked protectionism against foreign steel and aluminium. Does the Secretary of State still think that Donald Trump is a man we can do business with?

Dr Fox: We do business with the United States Administration because the United States is our closest strategic partner. Where we disagree on issues such as steel, we make our voice very clear. We do not support the use of section 232 as a mechanism for dealing with the overproduction of steel. That actually hits the United States' allies and not the designed target, which was China. Citing national security, particularly in Britain's case, makes no sense at all given that some of the steel that we send to the United States goes into its military programmes.

Leaving the EU: Women's Rights

2. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What steps he is taking to ensure that UK trade with developing countries promotes women's rights after the UK leaves the EU. [905354]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The UK is committed to promoting equality and women's rights in trade in the UK and around the world. We have taken decisive steps to recognise the role of trade in promoting gender equality by signing the WTO's joint declaration on women's economic empowerment. We also launched at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting last month the SheTrades Commonwealth programme, which will boost participation of women-owned businesses in trade.

Stuart C. McDonald: I very much welcome that answer because a well-designed trade policy can positively transform women's social and economic rights in developing countries. If that is not the case, that can destroy livelihoods, undercut wages and damage vital public services. Will the Minister commit to publishing an assessment of the impact on women of every trade deal that he signs with developing countries?

Greg Hands: I agree with the thrust of the hon. Gentleman's question. I commend the work of some key non-governmental organisations in this space, particularly ActionAid UK. The matter of impact assessments is one for future trade policy and future trade agreements. However, we are not waiting on that to make a difference on ensuring that women can participate fully in trade. I point him to a recent study by McKinsey that showed that, if women participated in the economy on an equal basis to men, there would be an increase of 26% in world GDP—the equivalent of an economy the size of the US and China put together.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): We drove this agenda in the EU. Is not the danger rather that, bereft of our influence, the EU will backslide?

Greg Hands: My right hon. Friend is quite right: the UK has been a key driver of that agenda. He is also right that the EU27 may well take a different approach. However, the UK approach remains strongly and resolutely in favour of promoting gender equality in trade and making sure that trade works particularly for women entrepreneurs, who make up a disproportionate part of the online entrepreneurial community.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): This will be my last outing as the Scottish National party trade spokesman; I will be moving to pastures new in Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. I want to put on the record my thanks to the Secretary of State and his team. While we do not always agree—in fact, rarely—our discussions and exchanges are always respectful and lively.

The 2013 Rana Plaza disaster is a prime example of how growth in export industries can have devastating results, particularly for women and girls. Jobs were created that were unsafe and had exploitative conditions for the largely female factory workers. Can the Minister assure the House and indeed everyone across the UK that any trade deals he does will not result in the exploitation of anyone, in particular women and girls?

Mr Speaker: May I say to the hon. Lady that I hope in her new role the sky will be just as blue?

Greg Hands: May I first commend the hon. Lady for the constructive role she has taken? She and I have worked together particularly to try to benefit certain businesses in Livingston, her constituency, and in terms of her wider brief.

Yes, of course, we are absolutely committed that future trade agreements will pay heed to the importance of gender rights and a whole series of other rights in those agreements. What we can do, however, in the meantime is make sure that the trade agenda fully recognises gender equality, particularly, as I have mentioned, in relation to the Commonwealth and the WTO. We were one of the 120 WTO members at Buenos Aires in December that adopted the joint declaration on trade and women's economic empowerment.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The Minister often remarks that trade has pulled millions of women out of poverty, but in the Trade Bill Committee the Government voted against ensuring that future trade deals fully comply with the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Has he changed his mind on this and, if so, will he ensure that future trade deals contain effective mechanisms that protect women in the global supply chain from exploitation, poverty wages and the suppression of trade union rights?

Greg Hands: I gently remind the hon. Lady that she of course voted against the Trade Bill in its entirety on Second Reading, which I think is always worth remembering. Secondly, I would say that we will take no lessons from Labour in this space because the UK has been a leader, over the last eight years, in making sure that this agenda is taken up at the WTO, at the European Union and at CHOGM. When it comes to future trade agreements and future trade policies around those trade agreements, that will be a matter for future proposals, as she well knows.

Leaving the EU: Textile and Fashion Industry

3. **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What plans he has to secure export markets and inward investment for the UK textile and fashion industry after the UK leaves the EU. [R] [905356]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): I am delighted to tell the hon. Lady that 2017 saw our fashion and textile exports up 6%, that a new creative industries trade and investment board is being created and that trade associations are being extensively consulted ahead of the launch of our new export strategy.

Dr Cameron: I am chair of the textile and fashion all-party group, and this week we held a wonderful Commonwealth fashion event, with diversity, talent and young design on show. However, there are issues in terms of intellectual property rights and passporting, so would the Minister demonstrate his flair for fashion and attend the all-party group to discuss these issues?

Graham Stuart: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady. This week, the meeting was on the Commonwealth; the last meeting, I believe, was on China. She is doing a great job with the APPG, focusing on the importance of fashion to the UK economy. It goes without saying that, however poorly dressed I am that day, I will be thrilled to go along and meet the much more fashionable members of that APPG.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): For more than 220 years, Johnstons of Elgin has been producing some of the finest-quality cashmere clothing, fabrics and accessories. Will the Minister continue to support this great industry, and will he explain what the UK Government are doing to ensure we have more export markets for the textile industry?

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is right. Inward investment in Scotland has included Chanel buying Barrie in Hawick and we have trade working groups covering 21 countries. The very formation of this Department means that for the first time we have a Department of State only focused on our international economic competitiveness. For the fashion industry, for Scotland and for the whole of the UK, we will aim to work flat out to build our exports and improve the levels of investment into this country.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: In a moment we will hear from the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman). He has been chuntering from a sedentary position about the suit worn by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), apparently expressing the hope that it was made in west Yorkshire. That is not a matter for the Chair—I have no idea. It seems to me a most admirable suit, but I have no idea where it was made.

Mr Sheerman: Unlike you, Mr Speaker, the Minister has never been to Huddersfield or visited the Textile Centre of Excellence. I keep inviting Ministers, but I think they are worried because Huddersfield, which is a

great centre in the premier league for fashion, has many employers who are fearful about the future and the 90% drop in inward investment in our country. There is real worry about the penetration of European markets after Brexit.

Graham Stuart: I am pleased to say that the fashion sense of the good people in the hon. Gentleman's constituency is different from his—that is why they are so well dressed. Not only that, but they have a different, optimistic view about the future of the UK outside the European Union, and that is why, unlike the hon. Gentleman, they voted overwhelmingly to leave.

Mr Sheerman: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My constituents voted to remain. The Minister is misleading the House.

Mr Speaker: I am sure it was inadvertent. There was not going to be further discussion on this question, but the effect of raising a point of order in mid-question is to preclude any further supplementary questions on the matter. In this case, however, the crime is victimless.

Free Trade Promotion

4. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to promote the merits of free trade to the public. [905357]

11. **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to promote the merits of free trade to the public. [905367]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The UK champions the opportunities created by free trade. As I said in my lecture at Speaker's House last month, free trade increases prosperity, stability and, in turn, security. My Department engages businesses and the public to set out the economic and moral case for free trade: better UK jobs, consumer access to high-quality, well-priced goods and services, and lifting people in the developing world out of poverty.

Martin Vickers: I thank the Secretary of State for his reply. Forecasts suggest that 90% of economic growth in the coming years will be in countries outside the EU. Does he agree that that gives this country great opportunities to extend our trade with developing nations, which will be of great benefit to them?

Dr Fox: I agree with my hon. Friend that that provides enormous opportunities. Free trade has helped to lift more than 1 billion people out of poverty since 1990, and we will do all we can to continue to support the liberalisation of trade with developing countries. Indeed, we demonstrated that commitment by announcing £18 million to support the WTO's enhanced integration framework in December at Buenos Aires.

Nigel Mills: A slightly surprising grouping, Mr Speaker. Does the Secretary of State agree that the public might be even more strongly in favour of free trade if they are completely convinced that the right remedies are in place for goods that come from countries that are perhaps not quite as keen on free trade as we are?

The ceramics industry, for example, has a big base in my constituency, so will he ensure that, when we import products from countries that have a state-distorted market, the right powers are in place in the Bill?

Dr Fox: I am grateful for the support that my hon. Friend gives to the ceramics industry. It is, of course, necessary to have an international rules-based system. Where we have problems with that, it is our duty to try to improve it, not to try to break or leave the system.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): What optimistic free trade message is the Secretary of State going to give to Welsh hill farmers or Suffolk sugar beet growers?

Dr Fox: The same message that I would give to everybody: free trade is of benefit to consumers and producers alike in the UK and to our trading partners. As I said, it has been one of the main tools through which we have alleviated global poverty.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): One thing that free trade depends on is investment. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to promote outward direct investment by the UK to help those countries with which we would like to engage in greater free trade?

Dr Fox: The Government have recently completed a number of pilot projects on outward direct investment, and ODI can be a major adjunct to our development agenda. I recently visited a Jaguar Land Rover dealership in Johannesburg. It is not only promoting the sale of UK goods abroad, but providing apprenticeships in mechanics and salesmanship for some of the most deprived young people in Johannesburg. Trade and development can go hand in hand.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Those who advocate protectionism often claim that free trade means a free-for-all. It is not. May I urge the Secretary of State to make it clear that free trade means trading within the rule of law, with clear remedies to the benefit of everyone?

Dr Fox: The WTO and the rules-based system is under attack, it has to be said, today. If the WTO did not exist we would have to invent it. There is a need for a rules-based system, otherwise we would have a free-for-all. The alternative to a rules-based system is a deals-based system, which might be fine for some of the biggest economies but would not help many of the smaller developing economies. It is our moral duty to ensure that there is fair play across trade.

Foreign Direct Investment

5. **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase the level of foreign direct investment into the UK. [905359]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): To ensure that we continue to be a global leader in attracting foreign direct investment, the Department for International Trade has launched a new FDI strategy that will deliver new ways to target support for those projects that create the most value for investors and national wealth. I am

pleased to say that 2016-17 was a record year for FDI projects landing in the UK, showing that the fundamentals of the UK economy are strong.

Victoria Prentis: Will my right hon. Friend tell me why, in his assessment, investors choose to invest in the UK?

Dr Fox: We regularly ask our investors why they put money in the UK and the answers are very similar. They say that the British legal system provides certainty and predictability. We have a skilled workforce. We have a good, predictable regulatory system and a low-taxation economy. We speak English. We have some of the best universities and some of the best access to tech, and we are in a good time zone for global trading. None of those, incidentally, depends on our membership of the European Union.

Leaving the EU: Third-country Trade Deals

6. **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential benefits to the UK arising from third-country trade deals after the UK leaves the EU. [905361]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): Leaving the EU means, for the first time in over 40 years, we will from next March be able to sign and ratify new trade deals. We are currently party to about 40 international trade agreements and are committed to securing continuity of those agreements. We have also established 14 trade working groups in major markets to explore the best ways of developing new trade and investment relationships post Brexit.

Stephen Hammond: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. He will know, as I do, that international regulatory standards are what fuel international trade. For the continuation of those deals and opportunities, does he agree that regulatory alignment will be necessary to secure the best British deals post Brexit?

Greg Hands: As my hon. Friend will know, we have some good news for him about the implementation period. The UK will be party to those deals up to the end of December 2020. He is also right that there is a very important read-across between what is agreed with the EU on standards, rules of origin and so on. Our commitment remains absolute to have high standards and to encourage the use of broad international global standards of the highest quality.

10. [905366] **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Ministers have said that trade with Commonwealth countries will be important after Brexit and the Minister will be aware that currently our trading arrangements with many African and Caribbean Commonwealth countries are by virtue of the Cotonou agreement, which is due to be renegotiated during the transition period. Will the Minister say what trade arrangements he expects we will have with those countries once the new agreement with the EU takes effect?

Greg Hands: As I say, up to the end of 2020, the UK will remain party to those agreements as they stand. We are also putting in significant efforts to make sure that the substance of those agreements rolls over beyond

that. That is why we have signed memorandums of understanding with, for example, the South African Development Community—the South African customs area—CARIFORUM and the eastern and southern African economic partnership agreement group. That is work that is making good progress.

Leaving the EU: Preferential Market Access

7. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that the UK maintains preferential market access to those countries with which it currently has such access as a member of the EU after leaving the EU. [905362]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The Government are committed to securing continuity of existing EU trade agreements and other preferential arrangements as we leave the EU. The draft withdrawal agreement confirms EU international agreements continue to apply to the UK during the implementation period. We are working to ensure continuity of those arrangements after that.

Alex Cunningham: The REACH—registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—regulations that govern production and other standards are critical to countless chemical companies in my Stockton North constituency and beyond for trade across the world. Will the Minister update the House on the progress to retain them when we leave the EU?

Greg Hands: I met the chemicals industry earlier this week—in line with other industries—in a very useful roundtable at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. That work to make sure that the UK benefits from the best possible rules as we go forward is ongoing.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one of the big opportunities from leaving the EU is that we can negotiate trade deals that best suit the UK, rather than being tied into the other 27 member states?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. That is why we have these 14 trade working groups with major markets around the world. We are in active discussions with those counterparts and we have the benefit, from March next year, of the ability to negotiate, sign and ratify trade agreements with them.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): First, the Government said that they were simply rolling over these agreements on precisely the same terms. Then they admitted that they would have to amend the agreements with Norway, Turkey and Switzerland to avoid rolling over such things as the customs union or the four freedoms that they would rather avoid, but the Minister has still not explained what process this sovereign Parliament will undertake to ensure that these important new agreements are subjected to proper democratic scrutiny. When will he?

Greg Hands: We had significant exchanges on this during the Trade Bill Committee and the scrutiny arrangements are enshrined in that Bill, which I note again that the hon. Gentleman voted against. He will also know that these agreements have already been

scrutinised in this House under existing EU scrutiny procedures, and there are precise arrangements set out in the Bill for how we go forward from here.

Commonwealth Countries: Trade Agreements

8. Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): What progress he made on potential trade agreements with Commonwealth countries at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in April 2018. [905363]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): My Department continues to work with the 24 Commonwealth countries that are part of the EU's economic partnership agreements or other preferential arrangements to ensure that there is no disruption to our existing trade. We also have regular discussions with Australia and New Zealand on our future bilateral trading relationships through our trade working groups. With Canada, we already have an agreement in place in CETA—the comprehensive economic and trade agreement—which will form the basis of a UK-Canada agreement once we have left the European Union.

Mr Seely: That is good news. Firms in my constituency such as GKN-Melrose, Vestas and BAE Systems export across the Commonwealth and the wider world. Is my right hon. Friend confident that post Brexit, we will be able to continue and grow that trade?

Dr Fox: Very confident. I pay tribute to the companies such as BAE and GKN that he mentions in his constituency, which are exemplary exporters. We intend to have an open and comprehensive trade agreement with the European Union. We intend to take advantage of the fact that the International Monetary Fund says that 90% of the global trade increase will be outside Europe in the next 10 to 15 years, and we have a new export strategy to support all exporters, including the ones that he mentions in his constituency.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Ironically, a trade deal between India and the European Union is more likely to be agreed by the remaining EU27, as two of the main stumbling blocks are whisky and visas, which mainly involve the United Kingdom. Therefore, will the Secretary of State advise me, the House and my constituents at the Auchentoshan distillery and the Loch Lomond distillery how they will seek to overcome that when the Government will be all alone?

Dr Fox: One of the main problems with India, of course, is the tariff that it applies on whisky. We have been involved in a trade review with India for some months now, and part of the process is to look at the areas where we require liberalisation to bring our two economies close enough to be able to consider a free trade agreement. The high tariff applied on Scotch whisky by India is one of the impediments, and we continue to urge them to reduce that.

EU Free Trade Agreements

9. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): If he will take steps to ensure that the UK has third-party membership of current EU free trade agreements to maintain compliance with rules of origin requirements after the UK leaves the EU. [905365]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): Since the draft withdrawal agreement confirms that international agreements continue to apply to the UK during the implementation period, common rules of origin will remain until the end of 2020. We are keen, of course, to avoid disruption to supply chains, so we are working to secure continuity after this.

Kerry McCarthy: I am sure the Minister has met motor manufacturers who have warned that they will simply not be able to meet the 60% local content requirement under rules of origin if EU components cannot be included. At present, the UK content is between about 40% and 44%. How will the Minister address that?

Greg Hands: I think the hon. Lady is referring to the EU's current set of more than 40 agreements with more than 70 counterparts. That is a matter for active discussions. We are obviously trying to secure the best possible deal for UK motor manufacturers, not only those involved with the finished product but those who provide the components, as part of our talks with third parties.

Topical Questions

T1. [905368] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): My Department is responsible for foreign and outward direct investment, for establishing an independent trade policy, and for export promotion. I am delighted to announce that my Department recently appointed John Mahon as our new director general for exports; he will oversee the delivery of the Government's export strategy. Later today, my fellow Ministers and I will be in Stirling for the third meeting of the Board of Trade.

Alex Cunningham: In the light of the latest mass killing of Palestinian civilians by the Israel Defence Forces, will the Secretary of State review and apply the criteria for arms sales to states that violate international law?

Dr Fox: The UK has one of the most robust arms export systems, which we operate under the consolidated criteria in line with our EU partners.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I welcome the Department's focus on international trade. I am delighted to hear that the Redditch eastern gateway is included in a project and strategy that the Secretary of State will announce today. Will he update the House on what he will do to bring much-needed international investment into Redditch?

Dr Fox: Later today I shall outline a project to attract £30 billion of foreign direct investment to the United Kingdom. Many projects, such as the one mentioned by my hon. Friend, are not necessarily visible to global investors, but our new website will ensure that we can attract more investment in middle-sized opportunities, which will genuinely help to bring prosperity to constituencies such as my hon. Friend's.

T3. [905370] **Karen Lee** (Lincoln) (Lab): In 2017, Britain sold £216 million worth of military contracts and supplies to Israel and £571 million worth to Turkey. The disproportionate use of deadly force by those nations against Palestinian and Kurdish citizens has been rightly condemned. Does the Minister agree that the UK needs a transparent and human rights-oriented arms trade to ensure that this country does not enable brutal attacks to be made on civilians?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): All export licence applications are rigorously assessed, case by case, against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria. No licence will be granted if there is a clear risk that the equipment might be used for internal repression, or in a serious violation of international humanitarian law. However, we continue to monitor the situation in Israel and Gaza closely.

T2. [905369] **Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): I hope that the Secretary of State enjoyed his recent visit to Aberdeen, which is probably the most productive part of Scotland, let alone the United Kingdom. Does he agree that the oil and gas industry is a deserving recipient of the export finance that is boosting that valuable sector?

Dr Fox: I did indeed enjoy my visit to Aberdeen, where I was able to chair a roundtable of companies from across the oil and gas industries as well as meeting senior figures from the Wood Group. Representatives of UK Export Finance were present at both meetings, and, as my hon. Friend will know, we are more than happy for UKEF facilities to be made available to the sector.

T4. [905372] **Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): Given the uncertainty over the future customs arrangements between this country and the rest of Europe, what steps is the Department taking to ensure that training is provided for the additional customs officials who will be needed to deal with the probable extra workload?

Dr Fox: That is not, in fact, the duty of the Department. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is responsible for customs in the United Kingdom. None the less, HMRC has received extra funds from the Treasury to ensure that preparations are made for Brexit.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): The UK defence and aerospace industry plays a vital role in the country's prosperity, and Farnborough, in my constituency, has a special place at the heart of it. What steps is the Department taking to support the industry, and will the Secretary of State kindly confirm that members of his team will attend the Farnborough international air show in July?

Dr Fox: I can certainly give that assurance to my hon. Friend. He will also know that in order to improve the functioning of our defence and security exports we are reorganising the Defence and Security Organisation so as to separate the defence from the security elements, because they require different levels and types of Government intervention and contact. I want to ensure that the appropriate skills are there to maximise our defence and security exports.

T5. [905373] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What is the Secretary of State doing to secure more trade with India?

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): It was my pleasure to address the hon. Gentleman's all-party group on India only last week, and we have a huge success story. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has talked about the trade audit—the trade review—that we have done with India. I can also report that bilateral trade has increased by 15% over the last year, and we remain the largest G20 investor in India, with British companies currently employing around 788,000 people in India.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): It was a pleasure to welcome the Secretary of State to my constituency last week where he could see that, from food and drink to oil and gas, Aberdeen is best placed to take on the opportunities of Brexit. I thank my right hon. Friend's Department for promoting Aberdeen's £150 million Queen's Square project this afternoon. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the benefits to Scotland of extending the high potential opportunity scheme, and does it not show that Scotland is better off in the United Kingdom?

Dr Fox: One of the benefits of having a UK-wide Department is that we are able to use economies of scale to lever international investment into the whole of the United Kingdom. My hon. Friend will be aware that a number of projects in Scotland are being highlighted today during our visit to Stirling, and it is much better to have a UK-wide Department able to bring investment to all parts of the United Kingdom than to have it broken up and fragmented.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—
STEM Careers

1. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage more women to take up STEM careers. [905376]

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister for Women and Equalities, on her debut at the Dispatch Box in this capacity I think: Penny Mordaunt.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am delighted to be here in my new role as Minister for Women and Equalities on International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, and I hope all Members of this House will show their support to that cause today.

The Government have committed in our careers strategy to improving information and guidance on STEM careers. We are also raising awareness of the range of careers that STEM qualifications offer.

Vicky Ford: I welcome the Minister to her new responsibilities and thank her for her commitment to women studying science and maths.

In Britain the percentage of women doing engineering is the worst in Europe: fewer than one in five of those studying physics A-level are female. I am going straight from here to the Institute of Physics. Will the Minister back up the Government's words with action: break the deadlock and support prizes and grants for girls studying physics?

Penny Mordaunt: I will certainly do that. My hon. Friend can take that message very strongly to the meeting she is about to attend, and I thank her for the work she is doing to promote these careers and qualifications to girls. We fund the Stimulating Physics Network, which provides schools with the means to improve progression to physics A-level. The network provides activities specifically to increase the proportion of girls taking physics A-level.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Of all Ministers, this Minister will be the one who understands the opportunities for girls, particularly those following STEM subjects, in joining the armed forces. The RAF presentation team is coming to my constituency, and I have particularly focused on asking primary schools if they would like to see the opportunity that STEM subjects offer for careers in our armed forces: does she agree?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree so much that I signed up myself. I pay tribute to the armed forces for the work they have done in recent years, in particular the RAF, some of whose initiatives have been pioneering. I would like to see more women serving in our armed forces; our armed forces will be operationally better if that is the case.

Protected Characteristics: Caste

2. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): When the Government plan to respond to the consultation on caste as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010. [905377]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): Our public consultation on how best to ensure that there is appropriate and proportionate legal protection against caste discrimination ran for six months last year. We received more than 16,000 responses, which demonstrates how important this matter is to some groups and communities, and we will respond in due course.

Bob Blackman: I welcome my right hon. Friend to her post. She is the third Minister for Women and Equalities since the consultation closed, and I have no doubt that she is going to wade through those 16,000 responses, which will overwhelmingly be in favour of caste being removed as a protected characteristic. Will she agree to meet me so that I can brief her on the feelings of the community on this matter?

Penny Mordaunt: I understand my hon. Friend's frustration. He has really championed this issue for a long time. I have already agreed to meet him, and I am very happy to do so, but I can reassure him that previous holders of this post have already briefed me and that this matter is receiving my immediate attention.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013 requires the Government to amend the Equality Act 2010 to provide for caste as an aspect of race discrimination, and that case law will not be sufficient to do that. In addition to meeting those who advocate removing caste altogether from the legislation, will she also meet the all-party parliamentary group for Dalits, so that we can explain why the will of Parliament must be followed?

Penny Mordaunt: I will be happy to do that, and I would like to do it swiftly. I want to ensure that we take absolutely the right decision. The responses to the consultation were heavily weighted towards one outcome, but I want to know the case law and all the arguments before we take any decision.

Gender Pay Gap: Action Plans

3. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that companies publish action plans to reduce their gender pay gaps. [905378]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): I am delighted that 10,212 employers have now reported their gender pay gap, as of 9 o'clock this morning. That is 95% of eligible employers. Of course, reporting is just the first step, and it is important that employers now take action to close the gender pay gap in their businesses and organisations. Many have already published action plans, and we are working to support employers to take action to close those gaps.

Daniel Zeichner: Of course, had the coalition implemented Labour's ground-breaking 2010 Equality Act fully, we would be much further down the road towards gender pay equality today. It is all very well publishing the data, but when is the Minister going to show some grit and insist that companies produce action plans, so that we can make some real progress?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman does the Government a disservice, if I may say so. This is world-leading legislation, and I have always been careful to ensure that we share the credit for it with the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who brought the Act into being. We are ambitious about this, but we want to bring business with us. This is about cultural change, and there are really good signs that businesses are now listening to the public's will that women must be paid fairly and properly.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): The new Minister for Women and Equalities made an announcement that was welcomed by the Labour party when she said that sectors under the Government's remit would lay out plans for organisations to publish their gender pay gap audits. It is good to see that that is one of her first actions, but does it go far enough? Can we be a little bit more ambitious? Will the Government commit to taking the next step, just as the Labour party is proposing, and introduce mandatory regulation so that next year all companies will have to report action plans alongside their gender pay gap figures or face fines and further auditing?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. We are reviewing the evidence carefully. We know, for example, that more than 10,000 businesses have been having a conversation about their pay policy in a way that they simply were not doing a year ago. We will review the evidence carefully and see what more needs to be done to ensure that businesses are working in accordance with the public will to ensure that these gaps are closed.

Leaving the EU: Effect on Women

4. **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on women. [905379]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): I have regular meetings and discussions with ministerial colleagues about the UK's exit from the European Union. As we leave the EU, we are committed to retaining the rights of workers and all the protections of the Equality Acts of 2006 and 2010, including those that particularly benefit women.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Is the Minister aware of how much EU funding specifically focuses on women and addresses the causes of gender inequality? Will she give assurances to the women of Wales and the rest of the UK that they will not pay a higher price when, or should, Brexit spark a downturn in the economy?

Penny Mordaunt: I can give them that assurance. Protections will still exist in our law, and we will have a dividend from leaving the EU, so we can choose what to spend that money on. It is wrong to scare people with the suggestion that equalities will somehow be watered down.

Freelance Workers: Shared Parental Leave

5. **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): If she will discuss with Cabinet colleagues the potential benefits for women of bringing forward legislative proposals to introduce shared parental leave for freelance workers. [905380]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): The hon. Gentleman has raised this issue with me in the House before with his usual tenacity and clarity. Family leave and pay entitlements focus on supporting employed parents, because they do not generally have as much flexibility or autonomy in taking time off. However, we are not ruling out further support for self-employed parents, but that must be considered carefully in the wider context of tax, benefits and rights over the long term.

Kevin Brennan: I want the Minister not just to rule it out; I want him to become a champion inside the Government along with his Women and Equalities colleagues. Shared parental leave for freelance workers would be one of the best ways to help women in the workforce to continue pursuing their careers. I ask the Minister to go away and think about that and to become a champion, rather than just someone who does not rule it out.

Andrew Griffiths: I certainly understand the hon. Gentleman's impatience, but progress is being made. He will know that a self-employed mother who wants to return to work without using her full maternity allowance entitlement can now convert that into 37 weeks of shared parental leave and pay for the employed father or partner. The hon. Gentleman can rest assured that we are considering the matter with great interest, and I will try to update him as soon as possible.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Given my hon. Friend's personal interest in this matter, will he join me in supporting the Government's "Share the joy" campaign to encourage greater take-up of shared parental leave?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank my hon. Friend. I assure him that Alice's arrival into the world has certainly given me a greater understanding of the joy that comes from parenthood. The "Share the joy" campaign is a Government initiative to promote the benefits of shared parental leave, because we want more parents to enjoy that time with their newborn baby. My hon. Friend can rest assured that we will continue to promote shared parental leave to get more parents to enjoy it.

Mr Speaker: I very much hope that the Minister will have today's *Official Report* framed and hung up in Alice's room.

Business: Representation of Women

6. **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure that women are better represented at the highest levels of business. [905381]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): Diversity is good for business. Organisations with the highest level of gender diversity in their leadership teams are 15% more likely to outperform their industry rivals. There are now no all-male boards in the FTSE 100, compared with 21 such boards in 2011, and the percentage of women on FTSE 350 boards has more than doubled since 2010. However, we know that there is more to do, which is why we commissioned the Hampton-Alexander review to improve female representation at the most senior levels in business.

Simon Hoare: Clearly, progress is being made, but in thanking my hon. Friend for her answer, may I ask how the Government are engaging positively with our business community to help meet the important Hampton-Alexander goals?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend, who has taken a long interest in diversity matters. Indeed, he is meeting the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), this afternoon to discuss this topic. The Government-backed Women's Business Council's recent toolkit, "Men As Change Agents", calls on FTSE 350 chief executive officers to embrace three asks to deliver the required pace of progress, including sponsoring women from within their organisation with the potential to secure an executive role within three years. My hon. Friend is keen to be an agent of

change, and I welcome his support and that of other male colleagues in driving the progress that we all want to see.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I understand that 7% of FTSE 100 companies have women chief executive officers. By contrast, the figure for businesses in Latvia is something like 47%. What can we learn from Latvia?

Victoria Atkins: Of course we are always willing to look at what is happening internationally. The hon. Gentleman will know that the plans in the Hampton-Alexander review are ambitious. For example, they require businesses, before 2020, to recruit women for one in two senior roles that now exist if business is to meet that goal. If it does not, the Hampton-Alexander review panel will look at what more should be done to encourage business to do so.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): One way to encourage more women through to the highest levels of business is strong mentoring. What more can be done to help spread that and roll it out further?

Victoria Atkins: Mentoring is just one way, and there is a lot of evidence to suggest that sponsorship is very successful in driving women up the career ladder. That is precisely why the Hampton-Alexander review has given help through the Women's Business Council and the toolkit. We have encouraged businesses to sponsor women within their organisation and to engage CEOs and other senior business leaders as change agents in championing the change required.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Scottish Government have delivered a returners programme to assist women to re-enter the workforce following a career break. Will the UK Government consider doing something similar to ensure that women in England and Wales continue their career progression towards the highest levels of business?

Victoria Atkins: Indeed. We have a scheme for exactly that. At the moment, we are looking at how best to spend that money, and I have a particular focus on teachers and social care workers to see if we can encourage them back into their professions. There is a much bigger challenge here for the private sector to make sure that women who have taken a break for caring reasons are encouraged back into the workforce, because we know that financial independence is a critical factor in making sure women have successful lives.

Domestic Abuse

7. **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on treating domestic abuse as a health priority. [905383]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): This Government are firmly committed to tackling domestic abuse. On 8 March, alongside the announcement of the domestic abuse consultation, we announced an additional £2 million to improve the health response, offering further support to survivors of domestic abuse.

The Home Secretary chairs an inter-ministerial group on violence against women and girls to ensure that all Departments, including the Department of Health and Social Care, work together to treat crimes such as domestic abuse as a priority.

Mrs Hodgson: I thank the Minister for her answer. She may be aware that, according to the SafeLives report published last year, early intervention through hospitals can reach four out of five victims who would not have reported the abuse to the police. Will she therefore outline what plans her Government have to ensure that all hospitals, in their A&E and maternity units, have onsite domestic abuse support workers?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady identifies a key touchstone for reaching women who perhaps have not been able to find the space or the courage to meet people who can give them help. There is a great deal of work going on, particularly with hospitals, as part of the £2 million package I announced earlier.

11. [905387] **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Although the Government say that victims of domestic abuse can apply for split payment of universal credit, a survey by Women's Aid shows that 85% of survivors say they would not dare apply as an exceptional measure, as it would attract further abuse. Is the Minister for Women and Equalities willing to meet me to discuss the importance of delivering split payments as the default to protect the financial independence of women?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady and I have already met to discuss this, and I know that she is greatly concerned. I am discussing the issue with my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions, and of course the Minister for Women and Equalities will meet her to discuss it further. We are very clear that the DWP and those who work in jobcentres are a gateway to potentially offering support and help to women who present with those symptoms.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Last week, I visited a refuge run by Hestia, the organiser behind next week's "UK Says No More" campaign—I have spare badges. Hestia tells me that nearly 1 million children every year are affected by domestic abuse, yet there are no meaningful resources to help tackle the mental health issues experienced by those children. What more are the Government prepared to do to provide resources to address the mental health issues of the children affected?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for that. I know that she is personally very committed to this subject. I was delighted to join Hestia this week at its launch event for a piece of technology that I believe will have a real effect on helping survivors and victims of domestic abuse. We are allocating £8 million specifically to help children who witness domestic abuse in their homes, because we all recognise the great harm this can cause children, both at the time of the abuse and in the longer term. That is precisely why children will be at the heart of the draft domestic abuse Bill, which will be presented to this House in due course.

Gender Recognition Act 2004

8. **Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): When the Government plans to launch the consultation on reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004. [905384]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): The Government Equalities Office will publish a consultation on the 2004 Act shortly. Our national LGBT survey received more than 100,000 responses and we are using the results to shape the questions in the consultation.

Sandy Martin: I thank the Minister for that answer. On this International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, what message will her Department give to the Great British media that discrimination against trans people is unacceptable?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be very happy to send that message from this Dispatch Box today. It is crucial that as we consult and discuss sensitive issues we do so in a climate of respect, empathy and understanding. Anything that runs counter to that must cease.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to her place. May I take this opportunity to recognise the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia? As part of the consultation, will the Government make the necessary legislative changes to allow non-binary people to record their gender as X on passports and on other UK-wide records and identity documents?

Penny Mordaunt: If this long-awaited consultation is to have impact and be of good use, it should consult on a wide range of issues, some of which should be the non-binary issues.

Gendered Online Abuse

9. **Anna McMorris** (Cardiff North) (Lab): What discussions she has had with social media companies on tackling gendered online abuse on their platforms. [905385]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The Government are committed to making the UK the safest place to be online. Ministers and officials at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport have had meetings with a range of social media companies to discuss abuse, including misogynistic abuse, on online platforms as part of our consultation on internet safety, to which we will respond imminently.

Anna McMorris: I thank the Minister for her answer. Half of all girls in the UK suffer online abuse and are bullied on social media. Girls are being told what to wear. They are being told to shut up about their opinions. They are being told about how they look. Is it not about time this Government take a serious look at this awful sexism and seek to regulate social media platforms?

Margot James: I very much share the hon. Lady's strong opinions, which are based on the facts: girls are intimidated and bullied disproportionately online, for all the reasons she sets out. I urge her to wait a very short time for our response to the internet safety consultation, which I trust will be robust.

Domestic Abuse: Support for Women

10. **Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support women who are experiencing domestic abuse. [905386]

12. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support women who are experiencing domestic abuse. [905389]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): This Government have introduced a new offence of coercive and controlling behaviour, rolled out new tools such as domestic violence protection orders and committed £100 million to supporting victims of violence against women and girls. On 8 March, we launched the consultation on domestic abuse, which will include not just the draft Bill, but a package of non-legislative measures to take steps to further support victims and target perpetrators of this terrible crime.

Holly Lynch: I am grateful to the Minister for that response. However, in 2016, the Ministry of Justice closed the courts in Halifax, and I hear from West Yorkshire police that it is now routinely taking up to 12 months for domestic abuse victims to have their cases heard in the neighbouring courts in Leeds, Bradford and Huddersfield. How have we allowed that to happen? Victims are withdrawing from that process. What are we doing to put this right?

Victoria Atkins: I am concerned to hear that. If I may, I will take that away and discuss it with my colleagues in the Ministry of Justice. In west London, the tri-borough scheme includes specific specialist domestic abuse courts. I am currently looking into that, because there may be more that we can do in that regard throughout the country.

Liz Twist: At Women and Equalities questions on 29 March, I asked the Minister about the concerns of Women's Aid and other domestic violence charities about the changes to supported housing funding, and I asked her to liaise with her colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Can she assure us that the concerns of Women's Aid and other charities have been taken into consideration? What discussions has she had with that Ministry?

Victoria Atkins: Discussions are ongoing; I speak constantly to my colleagues across the Government about the support we offer to victims of domestic abuse. The hon. Lady will know that we committed £20 million to the domestic abuse accommodation fund, and, like me, she will have been pleased that we introduced the Secure Tenancies (Victims of Domestic Abuse) Act 2018 to help the victims of domestic abuse.

Topical Questions

T1. [905391] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): Some 16% of the population is disabled, but their representation in our Parliaments, Assemblies and councils is far too low.

It is primarily political parties' responsibility to support their candidates properly, just as they must also support disabled employees. That is why I am announcing today that over the next 12 months my Department will, with others, undertake a programme of work to help political parties to best support their disabled candidates and to consider how independent candidates can be supported, too. While that work is under way, we will provide up to a quarter of a million pounds to support disabled candidates for elections in the forthcoming year. I shall keep the House updated.

Sir Desmond Swayne: It was an honour and my privilege to have whipped the equal marriage Bill through this House. Will the Minister complete that work by abolishing civil partnerships?

Penny Mordaunt: Although the demand for civil partnerships has tailed off since my right hon. Friend's efforts were brought to bear on that Bill, they are extremely valued by some people, and others would also like the opportunity to have a civil partnership. We are looking into the issue and have commissioned some additional research into opinions on and attitudes towards civil partnerships, but whatever the outcome of that research, I assure my right hon. Friend that they will not be compulsory.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister and welcome her to her new role. In the past 12 months, I have congratulated no fewer than three Ministers on their appointment to the role. [*Interruption.*] "Get used to it," I hear from a sedentary position, and that is exactly the problem. Responsibility for women and equalities has been passed from the Home Office to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, to the Department for Education, then back to the Home Office, and now it is with the Department for International Development. To add insult to injury, the Government Equalities Office will see its funding cut by almost half. All that does not really scream a commitment to women and equalities. Does the Minister agree that the Equalities Office needs a stable Department with proper funding?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome. We do need to stabilise the work of the GEO and to increase what we are doing on the equalities agenda across the Government. We have done some tremendous things in recent years, and we need to build on that work if we are really to address inequalities, not only in the policy areas for which I am directly responsible but across the Government, including in disability, age discrimination and elsewhere. Since I have taken this post, I have given this a lot of thought, and I will make some announcements in the forthcoming weeks.

T2. [905393] **Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con):** Equality of access to education and schooling opportunities for women and girls in the developing world is central to their life chances. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to support initiatives to widen access to education and schooling for women and girls?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. There are some good tie-ups between the work of the Department for International Development and the Women and Equalities role. I hope that I will be

able to help both Departments by being the joint Minister. We spend around £1 billion on education, half of which is specifically to help girls to access good-quality education. Most recently, we announced a further £212 million of funding through the girls' education challenge, to ensure that almost a million more marginalised girls throughout the Commonwealth can receive good-quality education.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Earlier in questions, the sharing of data and the working together of Departments in relation to domestic abuse and domestic violence was mentioned. Some time ago, I had a constituent whose data was shared, which meant that she had to come out of hiding, where she was being protected, and to move to another place because of that sharing of data by the Department for Work and Pensions. I know that that is something that the Minister is working on, but can she ensure that the highest possible resource and focus is given to this issue, because my constituent's life was put in danger by the fact that her data was shared with her ex-partner?

Victoria Atkins: I am dismayed to hear that. Clearly, that is not the intention of the amendments to the Data Protection Bill. We have put a declaratory statement in the Bill to encourage and give confidence to all the agencies involved in safeguarding that, under the Bill, they do have the right to share information for the purposes of safeguarding. I am extremely concerned to hear of the hon. Lady's case, and if she will write to me please, I will look into it.

T3. [905395] **Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con):** What measures is the Minister taking to tackle the rise of anti-Semitism?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his question; it is an extremely important and pertinent one. The number of anti-Semitic incidents in the UK is both unacceptable and, frankly, frightening for anyone of a Jewish background or disposition. We should all do what we can to tackle it. Our relationship with the Jewish community has been built on the solid work of the cross-Government working group on tackling anti-Semitism, which ensures that any issues are brought forward quickly and are dealt with. The Government are providing more than £13.4 million to ensure the security of Jewish faith schools, synagogues and communal buildings, following the concerns raised by the Jewish community. I wish that we did not have to spend that money, but we do, and we are.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Will the new Minister, whom I, too, congratulate, now publish the long-awaited inquiry of the previous Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), into the safety of women accessing abortion clinics? Will she also take up the recommendation of 160 parliamentarians, including David Steel, author of the Abortion Act 1967, to introduce buffer zones?

Victoria Atkins: May I thank the hon. Lady, who has run such an effective campaign on this, and the colleagues across the House who have written about this matter to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary? As she knows, the previous Home Secretary, in her capacity as both Home Secretary and Minister for Women and Equalities, took this subject extremely seriously, as does

the new Home Secretary. We are drawing together the evidence and looking at it very carefully, and we will, of course, let the House know the results of that review as soon as we can.

T4. [905397] Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I welcome the Government's commitment to transparency through gender pay gap reporting. Will my hon. Friend update the House on how many employers have reported during the first year of this new scheme?

Victoria Atkins: That is a typically astute question by my hon. Friend. As of 9 o'clock this morning, 10,212 businesses and organisations had responded, and 95% of all businesses and organisations that should have replied had done so, and we are now chasing the other 5%.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The trans community suffers some of the most profound discrimination across the world. Will the Minister advise the House what discussions are being held with her colleagues in the United States of America, where we are seeing an incremental rolling back of the rights of trans American citizens that fundamentally undermines the principles of America's liberal democracy?

Penny Mordaunt: One thing that I have been conscious of is how the progress that we have made on these issues and on wider issues has been a catalyst for change in other countries all around the world. We in the UK have a very important role to play. Let me give Members one example. At the recent Commonwealth Heads of

Government summit, our Prime Minister used the key part of her plenary session to champion the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. We will continue to do that in every nation on earth.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Women used to lag well behind men in terms of workplace pensions. Will the Minister update the House on the current situation?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It is true that women used to lag behind men in terms of workplace pensions, but at 73% their participation rates are now equal to those of men in the private sector. Thanks to auto-enrolment, 10,000 men and women in my hon. Friend's constituency now have a private pension. Thanks are also due to the 1,670 employers assisting them.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Particularly given her statement at the start of topical questions, will the Minister for Women and Equalities tell us what progress she has made in getting the position of disability commissioner reinstated at the Equality and Human Rights Commission?

Penny Mordaunt: I have been aware of this issue for some time, from a previous brief, and I can tell my hon. Friend that the commission is currently going through a tailored review that will look at the structures it has in place to represent and hear the views of disabled people and enable commissioners to focus on their needs and rights.

Business of the House

10.41 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 21 May will include:

MONDAY 21 MAY—Second Reading of the Tenant Fees Bill followed by motion to approve a money resolution relating to the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill.

TUESDAY 22 MAY—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments followed by general debate on serious violence strategy followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

WEDNESDAY 23 MAY—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments followed by Opposition day (12th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced, followed by, if necessary, further consideration of Lords amendments.

THURSDAY 24 MAY—Debate on a motion on the persecution of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee

FRIDAY 25 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

Today is International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, a day that is now celebrated in more than 130 countries and which unites millions of people in support of the recognition of human rights for all, irrespective of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. This week is also Mental Health Awareness Week. Two thirds of us will experience a mental health problem in our lifetime, and my greatest passion is that we do everything we can to improve mental health, especially in the earliest years, to give every baby the best start in life. I know that many Members have also worked hard to raise awareness of the appalling impact of brain injuries, and I congratulate all those holding fundraising events this weekend during Action for Brain Injury Week.

Finally, I am sure the whole House will want to join me in sending our best wishes to Prince Harry and Meghan Markle for their wedding on Saturday and all the very best for a long and happy life together.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business, but I note, again, that we have only four days of it. Will she tell us what we are doing on 4 June please? She knows that the Procedure Committee has produced a report, “Proxy voting and parental absence”, and we look forward to its being discussed. When will we have time to debate it?

I have to raise breaches of conventions of the House and the way we work together based on trust. The Parliament website states:

“Money resolutions...are normally put to the House for agreement immediately after the Bill has passed its Second reading in the Commons.”

I asked the Leader of the House last week what was abnormal about the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill—the boundaries Bill being promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton

(Afzal Khan)—that it should not have received a money resolution after its Second Reading, but she did not reply, so I will try again. I understand that consideration of the Bill in Committee was adjourned again. Have the Government decided not to follow convention any more, and is the Parliament website wrong?

The Leader of the House has just announced that the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill will be given its money resolution on Monday.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Splendid!

Valerie Vaz: Lucky you.

That Bill was the 94th Bill presented in the Session. The Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill was the ninth Bill presented, but it still has not had its money resolution. Why are these Bills being taken out of order? Are the Government now going against custom and practice, and deciding which Bill is worthy? Will the Leader of the House give us a reason today or in writing later?

There was another even more alarming issue this week, as raised yesterday in a point of order by the Opposition Chief Whip, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown). The Statement by the Secretary of State for Transport was wrong on two counts: first, Her Majesty’s Opposition were not given any notice of the statement, which might well be in breach of the ministerial code; secondly, the statement was given on an Opposition day.

It took great pressure—from an Opposition day debate and a petition—for the Government to announce a U-turn on Grenfell. In a written statement last Friday, it was announced that two extra experts would sit on the inquiry panel. Scheduling the statement yesterday was a huge discourtesy to the 71 bereaved families who were waiting for that debate. The bereaved just want to get on with their lives, rather than having constantly to lobby the Government for justice.

Will the Leader of the House, as the representative of the House in the Cabinet, raise this breach of convention with the Cabinet and update the House as to whether statements will no longer be given in Opposition time and that we will be given advance notice of statements?

Yesterday, the Parliamentary Secretary at the Cabinet Office said that she is

“very pleased and grateful to the House of Lords for the consideration that it has given to the EU withdrawal Bill”.—[*Official Report*, 16 May 2018; Vol. 641, c. 260.]

Will the Leader of the House confirm that the amendments have now been agreed, and that the Bill will be brought back to this House next week?

I ask again about the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill, which is known as the customs Bill. When will it come to the House on Report and Third Reading? The animal welfare Bill, the immigration Bill and the fisheries Bill have not yet been published. I know that the Leader of the House is interested in the agriculture White Paper, which has been published, so will she tell us when the agriculture Bill will be published?

We now have Sub-Committee A and Sub-Committee B, which are negotiating. Thank goodness we have a free press, because we now know that Conservative Members have been walking into No. 10 and the Prime Minister is also negotiating—that is Sub-Committee C. There are

[Valerie Vaz]

10 months to go before we leave the European Union, and the Government are still negotiating about the negotiations. With the Scottish Parliament voting against the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, our island's story has become a re-run of the Picts and the Scots, the Angles and the Scots, or perhaps the EVEL and the Scots.

This Government are incompetent and divided. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is negotiating on a customs arrangement instead of responding to the Joint Select Committee report on Carillion. The report, which will be presented later, said that the Government failed to spot the risks because of their "semi-professional part-time" system of oversight. When will we have an updated statement on the fall-out from Carillion's collapse?

It is National Epilepsy Week, so will the Leader of the House use her good offices to ask the Home Secretary whether he has signed the licence for Alfie Dingley's medication? The House will remember that Alfie had 150 seizures a month, but the medicine brought that figure down to one.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Baroness Jowell, who served 23 years in this House and two years in the other place—a glittering career in public service. This week is National Mental Health Awareness Week, so we should also mention that she was a former officer of Mind, the mental health charity. The House paid tribute to her, but most of us will remember her kindness to us personally. She sent an email to every single person who stood at the Bar of the House of Lords to hear her final speech. She sought me out when I was a new Member in 2010 to give me some support. Her achievements will live on. She used her time in this place not to destroy other people's lives, but to make a huge difference to them, and she has shown that in the change that she has made. No one will ever forget how our country was brought together in 2012.

Finally, we all saw Prince Harry make that long walk behind his mother's coffin. Now he will walk down the aisle of St George's Chapel. Diana, Princess of Wales would have been proud of him. We wish Prince Harry and Meghan Markle all the very best for their wedding and their life together.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and questions. First, I join her in paying tribute to Dame Tessa Jowell. She and I had many conversations about what I think was her most amazing achievement, which was the implementation of Sure Start. We shared a passion for the earliest years and a desire to see all babies given the best start in life. I pay tribute to her.

The hon. Lady asked about baby leave. As I have said on many occasions, it is absolutely right that we do all we can in the House to ensure that new parents, whether of naturally born babies or adoptive children or babies, have that vital time with them. We need to find a way to do that. We will look at the Procedure Committee's report and respond in due course.

The hon. Lady asked about private Members' Bills. I take very seriously my duty to safeguard the rights of those in this Chamber. I hear carefully all the representations

made by hon. and right hon. Members across the House. I would like to point out that some very important private Members' Bills have made good progress. Those include the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—all of us want to see the eradication of violent attacks on people who are trying to help us—and the superb Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), which will ensure vital support for parents who have suffered the tragedy of the death of a baby or child. The Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), is also making progress; it is vital that those with mental health issues are properly treated. There is good progress of private Members' Bills.

The hon. Lady asked about the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill. She will recall that we had an urgent question on that issue last week, when I sought to set out clearly that the money resolution for the Bill will be reviewed once the Boundary Commission review has taken place. It is important to understand that these things are expensive. The Boundary Commission review will cost taxpayers something in the order of £12 million, and it cannot be right that further money, to the tune of more than £5 million, be made available to a completely separate Bill when that work is under way. This is a postponement, and we will come back to it, but in the meantime all hon. Members should be pleased to see the progress of private Members' Bills on very important subjects.

The hon. Lady asked about the east coast main line statement yesterday. She will appreciate that the Government endeavour at all times to protect the Opposition's time and to schedule oral statements on alternative days as far as possible. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport outlined yesterday, his statement contained commercially sensitive information, so the Government needed to update the House at the earliest opportunity. On her more general point, I fully agree with the need to provide advance sight of statements in good time, and I will certainly remind my colleagues of the House's expectations.

The hon. Lady asked about the progress of other legislation. We have six Brexit Bills before Parliament: the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, the Nuclear Safeguards Bill, the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill, the Trade Bill, the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, and the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill. Some 28 Bills have been introduced so far, and 14 have had Royal Assent. Hundreds of statutory instruments have been passed by the House, and seven draft Bills have been published. The Government are progressing with their legislative programme, and the EU (Withdrawal) Bill will return once we have had the opportunity to fully consider and take into account the views expressed by the other place and what that will mean in this House. We will bring that forward in due course.

The hon. Lady asked about the lessons learned from the collapse of Carillion. She, and I think all hon. Members, will be aware that the Government's priority has been the continued safe running of public services and to minimise the impact of Carillion's insolvency. The plans we put in place have ensured that. However, the

Government fully recognise and welcome the report of the joint inquiry of the Work and Pensions Committee and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, and we will respond fully in due course.

Finally, the hon. Lady raised the harrowing case of those who suffer from severe epilepsy and who it is believed would benefit from cannabis-based drugs. The current situation, as she knows, is that outside of research, we will not issue licences for the personal consumption of cannabis because it is listed as a schedule 1 drug. We are aware of differing approaches in other countries and continue to monitor the World Health Organisation's Expert Committee on Drug Dependence, which has committed to review the use of medicinal cannabis. We will keep that under review.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the availability of properties to rent in the private sector that have been adapted for people with disabilities? It is difficult enough for able-bodied people to find properties to rent. That debate would reassure those with disabilities that the House has not forgotten their situation.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, my hon. Friend raises an incredibly important matter, and I assure him that the Government take it very seriously. Tenants living in privately rented properties can ask their landlords to agree to carry out adaptations, and landlords should not unreasonably withhold consent. Since 2012, the Government have invested almost £1.7 billion in disabled facilities grant funding, which is a capital grant paid to local authorities in England to contribute towards the cost of adapting a disabled person's property. About 250,000 adaptations will have been provided by the end of this year.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. I, too, welcome the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, and of course Mental Health Awareness Week.

In Scotland last week, we had the tragic death of Scott Hutchison, the lead singer of the wonderful Frightened Rabbit. His loss has galvanised all of Scotland and has helped to re-focus attention on young male suicide. Scotland has lost too many of its great artists to suicide. Scott, thank you for your wonderful, inspiring music. You will be sorely missed.

We are going to have to find an awful lot of time for the Lords amendments to the repeal Bill. The Government have been defeated an unprecedented 15 times at the hands of the gallant troops in ermine down the corridor. Can we get some sort of assurance that all these amendments will not simply be lumped together? I hear that the Government have considered that. It is important that no debate is curtailed. These Government defeats mean that for the first time we in this House will have meaningful votes on the single market and the Government's proposed customs arrangements. What we do not want is this Government reverting to type in trying to close down debate and stop votes happening in this House. We need a guarantee and certainty, today, that that will not happen.

On that theme, I totally agree with the shadow Leader of the House about the progress of the boundaries Bill.

After an uncomfortable outing for the Leader of the House last week in trying to defend this situation, it is now time to ensure that we get that money resolution. This issue is not going to go away for this Government.

It is very surprising that we have had no statement from the Government on the Scottish Parliament withholding its legislative consent on the repeal Bill. Perhaps that has something to do with the fact that the Conservatives were totally isolated in the 1990s in opposing the development and creation of the Scottish Parliament, and today they are totally isolated in refusing to defend its powers. Just look at them: Ruth's Scottish Tories have now become Theresa's hard-Brexit, devolution-threatening, Lobby-fodder Tories. It is absolutely no wonder and no surprise that there are now all sorts of predictions of another wipe-out and the demise of the Scottish Conservatives.

Andrea Leadsom: Let me start by absolutely sharing in the hon. Gentleman's sadness at the suicide of the lead singer of Frightened Rabbit. That was a great tragedy that demonstrates and highlights the fact that one of the biggest killers of younger men is suicide, and more needs to be done. I absolutely share in his sorrow at that news.

I do love the way that the hon. Gentleman's fondness for the other place moves in direct proportion to the amount of amendments that it brings forward. It is a delight to see. As I said last week, I suspect that he is secretly hankering after a job in the other place, and I am sure that all right hon. and hon. Members would be delighted to see that outcome for him.

I can assure the hon. Gentleman that when the EU withdrawal Bill comes back to this place, ample time will be given, as has been the case all the way through, for all right hon. and hon. Members to make their views fully known. The Government are taking account of all the different proposals to improve the legislation, as we have been all the way through. I think that all hon. Members would accept that the Bill now looks very different from how it did when it started in this place. The amendments and the improvements made to it have very much been taken into account by the Government wherever possible.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the legislative consent motion and the vote in the Scottish Parliament. It is of course true that we are very disappointed that the Scottish Parliament has declined to give the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill legislative consent. We have been very clear that our preferred way forward is with the agreement of the Scottish Parliament. We have made a considerable offer to try to accommodate all the views of the devolved Administrations, and we are delighted that the Welsh Assembly confirmed its acceptance on Tuesday.

The Bill has some further stages to go in the UK Parliament, and we still hope that the Scottish Government will come on board. Our door remains open, and I urge the hon. Gentleman to use his good offices to try to persuade his hon. Friends in the Scottish Parliament to provide legislative consent.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Many of us are increasingly concerned by threats to Britain's native flora from imported diseases, so may we have a debate in Government time on biosecurity?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an issue that is dear to my heart. He is absolutely right that we should do everything we can to protect our own wildlife—our fauna and flora—from the threats of imported disease. I know he will be reassured that our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is fully committed to that and is looking at further ways in which we can protect our own environment even better once we leave the EU than we do today.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Leader of the House said in her statement that she would make every effort to protect Opposition time when Opposition days occur. May I ask her to try to do the same for Back-Bench time? There are two Government statements today, which I anticipate will take up significant time, but there are also two Backbench Business Committee debates this afternoon. The one on plastic bottles and coffee cups, nominated by the Liaison Committee, is important, but the second debate is time-sensitive, because today is the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, so it is really important that that debate is aired this afternoon.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely understand the hon. Gentleman's concern about protected time. He will of course appreciate that there is a fine balance between making sure that the Government provide timely statements to the House, so that all key announcements are made here, and protecting time for what, as he rightly points out, are two very important debates this afternoon. I would seize this moment to mention to all hon. Members that, if they look at the update in the House news this week, they will see that Parliament has committed to eradicating single-use plastics and being the change we want to see, so the debate on plastic eradication is very timely.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Rough sleeping is a stain on our communities, and as a London MP I am continually frustrated by the inactivity of the Mayor. May I ask the Leader of the House for a statement on the measures the Government are taking so that the Mayor could learn some lessons?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important issue. It is vital that we take steps to eradicate rough sleeping. We are fully committed to making sure that everyone has a roof over their head and, importantly, the security they need in their home. That is why we pledged in our manifesto to eliminate rough sleeping by 2027, and to at least halve it by 2022. We have committed £1 billion to tackling rough sleeping and homelessness, but this is not only about money. We are changing how councils approach the issue, so we are implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—a superb private Member's Bill introduced by our hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—to help more people get tailored support sooner when they are at risk of homelessness.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Leader of the House will know that I have raised the issue of antisocial behaviour on a number of occasions, particularly the scourge of motorbikes being used for antisocial behaviour. May we have a debate to look at

what other measures we can introduce to deal with that, and in particular whether we can get all petrol stations to stop selling petrol to people driving motorbikes illegally and looking suspicious—as has happened in Hull with Operation Yellowfin, where 12 responsible petrol stations have agreed that they will not serve petrol—as one of the measures to try to tackle it?

Andrea Leadsom: I commend the hon. Lady for raising this issue again. She brings up antisocial behaviour regularly, and she is right to do so because it is a scourge on many communities. She raises the interesting question of whether those selling fuel could do more, and I urge her to raise that issue at Home Office questions on Monday 4 June.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): If we are to secure economic regeneration for our provincial towns, and particularly our coastal communities, local leadership and the powers available to local authorities are important. We currently have a disproportionate system in which some authorities with Mayors have greater powers and resources, and if areas such as northern Lincolnshire are to compete with them, they will need similar resources. Could we have a debate on that in Government time, so that the Government can lay before the House their long-term plans for local government?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency, and he raises an important point about greater local devolution. He knows that a core part of the Government's plans is to put local people more in charge of the area around them. I recommend that he seeks an Adjournment debate so that he can raise specific issues for his constituents.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Is it time for a general debate on the defence of parliamentary privilege? I understand that Mr Christopher Chandler has threatened six Select Committee Chairs with proceedings in the European Court of Human Rights if they dare to probe his links with President Putin. I happen to believe that if a New Zealander who is based in Dubai with acquired Maltese citizenship and a think-tank in Mayfair has suspect links, we should raise questions. Is it time to send a message from this House that we will not be bullied or intimidated by anyone, no matter what their wealth?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman's basic premise that nobody in this place should be bullied, and where we believe that there is wrongdoing, we should be free to investigate it. If he would like to write to me about his specific point, I will look at what more can be done.

Mr Speaker: Pursuant to what the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) has just said and the response of the Leader of the House, let me say that I have been approached about this matter in writing. I do not intend now to vouchsafe the details of that correspondence, but suffice it to say this: the principle of parliamentary privilege is extremely important to Members individually, and to the House institutionally. It is sometimes mistakenly thought that it is for the Chair to intervene and seek to prevent a Member from exercising that privilege. That, as a matter of constitutional

and procedural fact, is incorrect. I always urge Members who use privilege to make allegations to do so with care and responsibility, and in respect of the recent examples to which the right hon. Gentleman alluded, I know for a fact—I was in the Chair—that such care and responsibility was exercised by Members from all sides of the House. I will always defend the right of Members to use that privilege, and I do not care who writes to me to exhort me to prevent or limit that right. It will make not the blindest bit of difference.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I was grateful for the most important announcement made by the Leader of the House about the money motion for the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill, which has support across the House—I noticed that the Chief Whip came in for that, and the deputy Chief Whip is in his place.

I am also pursuing another private Member's Bill about a bank holiday in June. The country works very hard and we have few bank holidays relative to Europe. It seems to me that we should have a bank holiday in June, as close as possible to 23 June. The trouble is that I am seeking a name for that day. Does the Leader of the House—or anyone else in the House or across the United Kingdom—have any suggestions? The working title for the 23 June bank holiday is “Independence Day”, but I also seek other alternatives.

Andrea Leadsom: I am personally sympathetic to my hon. Friend's suggestion, and perhaps his birthday could be an alternative day. I am always happy to take up suggestions, and if he would like to write to me I will see whether I can make any further progress.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on rail franchising and the problems it is now clearly causing for commuters and passengers on long-distance journeys? I asked the Leader of the House about that last week in respect of the experience of my own constituents, and she kindly suggested that I apply for an Adjournment debate. It is quite clear to me, however, from the statement we received from the Transport Secretary yesterday, that this is a much more widespread problem than one just affecting my constituents, so may we have a debate?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. She will be aware that since franchising began there has been £6 billion of private investment in our railways and that passenger numbers have doubled since 1997-98. We are spending almost £48 billion on maintenance, modernisation and renewal to deliver better journeys and fewer disruptions. It is the view of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport that franchising is absolutely key to ensuring a better experience for rail passengers.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): May we have an urgent debate on the general data protection regulation? There has been some confusion about how it is to be implemented, not least among Members of Parliament and, importantly, our staff. This is so important, because it involves our constituents and their data. Will the Leader of the House update us, please?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised this point. I have had a number of representations from Members right across the House on this subject. On 15 May, I wrote a “Dear colleague” letter to all colleagues. I hope that all right hon. and hon. Members received it—they will have received it, but I just hope that it is in their inbox and has not been deleted. As I outlined in my letter, the House authorities continue to work closely with the Information Commissioner's Office and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to ensure that Members are well supported on the new regulations. Training and a help desk are available, and there is a set of frequently asked questions on the intranet. All that information is available in my letter. I urge all right hon. and hon. Members, if they have any further problems, to please contact my office.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Yesterday I launched the all-party group on domestic violence perpetrators, and the launch was well attended by Members from all parts of both Houses. However, the question was raised: what has happened to the domestic violence Bill? It was promised in the Queen's Speech. Can we have it before the end of this year, and will the Leader of the House please press her colleagues to get the Bill to the House as soon as possible?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to hear about the hon. Lady's new all-party group. This is a really important subject, and we are bringing forward a new domestic abuse Bill with an ambition for legislation that will be truly groundbreaking. We have launched a consultation on that Bill. We want to hear from experts, charities and frontline professionals, and, just as importantly, from survivors and those with experience of such abuse.

What I can say to the hon. Lady is that since 2010 we have strengthened the law on violence against women. We have introduced a new offence of domestic abuse and another of failing to protect a girl from female genital mutilation. We have created two new stalking offences. We have criminalised force marriage, introduced lifelong anonymity for victims of forced marriage and FGM, and introduced a new mandatory reporting duty on FGM. As the hon. Lady will know, we have also introduced in the Secure Tenancies (Victims of Domestic Abuse) Bill new protections for people fleeing from domestic violence. We take this matter incredibly seriously, and there will be further progress in due course.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My right hon. Friend has risen to the challenge I set her at Business questions, when I and other Members from across the Chamber asked for a debate on violent crime. I note from her statement that we are to have one. None the less, buoyed by that achievement and spurred by success, I must demand more. She has also received a missive from me and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for a specific debate on acquired brain injury. It affects very large numbers of people: 1 million people are living with its effects, with nearly 350,000 a year admitted to hospital. She mentioned acquired brain injury earlier, so I am encouraged that this first success will lead to many, many more.

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that my right hon. Friend is delighted that we have been able to bring forward Government time for a debate on serious violence.

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

It is an incredibly concerning matter—right hon. and hon. Members across the House have raised it with me on a number of occasions—so I am very pleased that we will be debating that subject. As to his second request, I am aware of the letter from him and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). Although there is a great deal of competing demand for time in the Chamber, I will consider it very seriously.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): My constituent Ramatoulie is a British citizen who was born in the Gambia. She recently discovered her birth certificate, issued in the Gambia in the 1950s, which showed that she was five years older than she had previously thought. When she informed British Government agencies, all accepted the new age except UK Visas and Immigration. The Passport Office is now refusing to issue a new passport to her. For the past three years I have spoken to every Immigration Minister and I have written to Government Departments more than a dozen times, but she is still in limbo with no ID and no passport, unable to travel. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate on the issue or bring Ministers here to explain what has gone wrong, how many other people are affected and when Ramatoulie can get her passport?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very concerning and important issue. He will be aware that there are Home Office questions on 4 June. Equally, if he wants to write to me, I can take it up directly with Home Office Ministers. I have to say to hon. Members, though, that someone discovering that they are five years older than they thought they were would be troubling enough without the further problems that his constituent has had to suffer.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the outstanding service offered to Members by the counter staff of the post office in the Members Library? Does she share my concern that it is impending that this service will be withdrawn, and should not Members be consulted more widely before that happens?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend has raised this issue with me directly. I have written to the Chairman of the Administration Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who has written back to him informing him of the decision that was taken by the Committee to change the opening hours. I absolutely agree about our great gratitude to the staff of the post office counter. I have put my right hon. Friend in contact with the Chairman of the Administration Committee, and I have urged the House authorities to make every effort to consult all Members, particularly through the regular House updates, so that they all have the opportunity to have input into any changes to important services in this place.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Not only am I a member of the Procedure Committee, which produced an excellent report on proxy voting and MPs' baby leave, but my wife Roslyn is expecting our second child in the autumn. May I therefore ask when the Government

will schedule time to debate the report? Is it likely that hon. Members on both sides of the House will have proxy voting in place after the summer?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman in advance—that is very exciting news—and I completely understand. A number of Members are expecting babies in the near future, so I will work at pace on this issue. He will appreciate that proxy voting has considerable constitutional implications and there are various factors to take into account, but I will be working on it as fast as I can.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate on parental alienation, which is a growing problem in this country? Parents who are resident with their children are in effect turning their children away from the absent parent, and it is causing a great deal of heartache for many families. It is one of the causes of the suicide rates that my right hon. Friend talked about earlier and is, in effect, a form of child cruelty. Can we do something about this, because it is causing misery for thousands of families up and down the country?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that. I am sure that we have all had people coming to see us in our constituency surgeries who are quite clearly determined to turn their own children against the non-resident partner. It is an absolute tragedy, and the losers are the children. I am totally sympathetic to my hon. Friend, and I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that all hon. Members can share their thoughts on this.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House welcome the launch of my new campaign to eradicate litter? I am encouraging schoolchildren in my constituency to devise a poster or a campaign. Can we have a debate in this place on the blight of litter and plastic waste in our constituencies?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her campaign. It is fantastic to see Members tackling this problem head-on in their constituencies. In March I had the great pleasure of clearing up litter in Towcester with a great group of local volunteers, and we had the great plastic clean-up last weekend, in which the Prime Minister herself took part. It is vital that we continue to raise the issue. The hon. Lady might like to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can discuss it with Ministers, and discuss more specifically what can be done to encourage people to stop littering.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Recently, during Prime Minister's Question Time, I raised the subject of the fatal shooting at Queensbury station. Following that, there has been armed confrontation in the Harrow Weald ward, in my constituency, and three young boys have been shot in Wealdstone high street in broad daylight. One, aged 12, was being escorted by his parents. On Monday, there was another shooting incident in the constituency of my neighbour, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner).

I am delighted that there is finally to be a debate on the serious violence strategy, but given that on the same day we are also considering Lords amendments to the Data Protection Bill—and, possibly, other Lords

amendments—can my right hon. Friend ensure that the debate is given protected time so that all Members have an opportunity to raise these very serious issues, which are blighting London in particular?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about the appalling occurrences that have taken place in the last few weeks. Over the bank holiday weekend there were some terrible instances of shootings and knife crime, particularly in London, which were appalling for families and friends and, of course, for the victims themselves. I am very sympathetic to my hon. Friend, and I will find out whether we can indeed provide protected time. I recognise the urgency of the need for that debate.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Government are currently consulting on a new franchise for South Eastern which will result in the removal of the Victoria service on the Bexleyheath line, apparently because it would be too confusing for service providers to have trains crossing over west of Lewisham. This weekend, however, a new timetable will come into force which says that they can only go to Victoria on a Sunday. It seems that the service is being run for the providers and not for the customers. May I join my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) in calling for a debate in Government time on rail franchising, so that we can expose the fact that the trains are being run for service providers rather than passengers?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear about the problems that the hon. Gentleman has raised. He will be aware that Transport questions will take place on Thursday 24 May and he may well want to raise those specific issues then. I hope that he participated in the questions on yesterday's statement, when there were opportunities to speak to the Secretary of State for Transport directly.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I was going to ask for a debate on the excellent small charities challenge fund, managed by the Department for International Development. However, an urgent situation is developing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where Ebola has raised its ugly head again and has now spread to the city of Mbandaka. Given the work that the United Kingdom and others did in 2014 and 2015 to help to stop the spread, may we have an urgent debate on the matter, and on how the United Kingdom and its allies can support the people of the DRC and their excellent health services in bringing this outbreak to an end?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has rightly raised an issue that is of great concern to all Members. The return of Ebola is horrifying: the last outbreak was unbearable for so many people. I encourage him to raise the issue directly with Ministers during International Development questions on Wednesday 23 May.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): In this morning's newspapers, my constituent Marie McCourt tells of her anguish that her daughter's killer has been granted temporary release from prison. I have asked the Justice Secretary to intervene, but will the Government now introduce legislation—"Helen's Law"—to ensure that

this man, and other murderers who do not reveal the location of their victims' remains, stay where they belong, in prison?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an appalling situation and I can absolutely sympathise with anybody in that position, where the offender is allowed to get out of prison early. I am totally sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman's desire to see that change. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise the particular circumstances of that case with Ministers.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Channel 4 has announced the creation of regional hubs and news bureaux. May we have a debate in Government time on why Colchester, as the creative capital of the eastern region and with a world-class university, would be a perfect location for such a site?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my hon. Friend on making his pitch very publicly here today. I certainly think that there will be plenty of opportunities for this discussion as the time approaches for a decision to be made.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on the impact of cuts to community pharmacies on their ability to carry out their pivotal role at the heart of the health service?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the incredibly valuable role of community pharmacies. He may want to raise that in an Adjournment debate so he can discuss with Ministers precisely what steps he thinks they should take to protect that incredibly valuable role.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): A few weeks ago Councillor David Slater, a sitting county and borough councillor and the former, and longest-serving, leader of Charnwood Borough Council, passed away. David was a selfless and dedicated public servant. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to David's work and the work done every day across this country by elected local councillors, regardless of party, and may we have a debate on the value that that brings to our communities?

Andrea Leadsom: I think we all know of people who go above and beyond the call of duty in serving the people of this country in councils across the United Kingdom. I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to his constituent. He may wish to seek a Backbench Business debate so that all Members can pay tribute to those who do such good work in their own areas.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): May we have a debate on the crucial matter of mobility benefits for infants with life-threatening conditions? There is currently an anomaly in the system in that they must be aged three to qualify, despite medical assessments being able to be undertaken well before this time. May we have that debate so that children's lives and the quality of their lives are paramount and their families do not have to spend what is precious time battling the system?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to what the hon. Lady says. It is vital that young children are able to live as normal a life as possible regardless of their disability. She may wish to raise that at Work and Pensions questions on 21 May.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Last Sunday, the annual Crazy Hats walk took place in Northamptonshire, when we remember those who have tragically lost their lives to breast cancer and raise funds to support those affected by this dreadful disease. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the remarkable Glennis Hooper, the founder of the charity, who has raised millions of pounds for care in Northamptonshire, and may we have a debate next week on the important role that these charities play in supporting NHS care?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to pay tribute to all those who do so much to support cancer care of all types, and particularly breast cancer care. I have a number of family members who have suffered from this awful disease, which takes far too many lives and damages so many lives. I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to all who are raising funds to support cancer charities.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): The Financial Conduct Authority is currently considering whether to extend regulations that have been successfully applied to payday loan providers to doorstep lenders. This is an important issue for financial inclusion. Could we debate it please in Government time?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. The behaviour of payday lenders and other high-cost lenders is a scourge for people on low incomes often who cannot afford their incredibly high interest rates. He is right to raise that matter. The FCA has within its remit the ability to look further into this. He may wish to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise directly with Ministers the progress of the FCA's review of the cost of payday lending.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): France, Germany, Italy and Spain have built their auxiliary tanker and support ships in domestic yards. May we have a debate on the value of the Ministry of Defence commissioning our three new fleet solid support ships using British yards, British steel and British jobs, which would bring tax and national insurance contributions in excess of £350 million into the Treasury?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises the important matter of how we spend our defence budget, and she is right to ask what more could be done to ensure that British firms benefit from those contracts. She will be aware that the Ministry of Defence seeks wherever possible to ensure that UK companies get the best chance to bid for that business, but that it will nevertheless seek the best value for the taxpayer at the same time as committing to a thriving UK defence industry.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): May we have a debate on the mental health of new mothers?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend and I share a passion for the importance of a secure early bond between babies and their parents, and she rightly raises

the need to ensure that all mums have the right level of support, both physically and mentally, in those crucial early years. I am very sympathetic to the idea of a Back-Bench debate or a Westminster Hall debate on this, so that hon. Members can put forward their own thoughts on what more support could be provided to new mums.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Since our exchange last week, Cottrell Park golf course has written to the Leader of the House and to me to say that it is happy for women to play golf competitively on Saturday mornings. Unfortunately, my constituent, Lowri Roberts, remains suspended from the course for having spoken out on this matter. Does the Leader of the House agree that we should have a debate on the issue? If we want women and girls to participate in sport, this kind of thing has to stop.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be delighted to see that the Sports Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), has walked into the Chamber just at the right moment, and that she heard what he said. I saw the letter from the golf course, and I join him in believing that women and girls should be encouraged to play all sports, including golf, on Saturdays, Sundays and every other day of the week—provided of course that they are getting all their school work done.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Supporting the high street is now more pertinent than ever, and a proven key way of helping to do that is to lower parking charges. Will the Leader of the House support a debate on the impact of lowering parking charges, to encourage Wiltshire County Council and others to recognise the merits of doing that?

Andrea Leadsom: A big issue in all our constituencies is the question of whether we should have parking charges that raise revenues or no parking charges, which helps the high street to thrive. I am sympathetic to my hon. Friend's request. She might like to raise the matter directly with Ministers at Transport questions on 24 May.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. In response to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), the Leader of the House made the point, perfectly reasonably, that the Government have to balance the rights of Back-Bench Members against the sometimes necessary delivery of ministerial statements. There is not necessarily a perfect balance, but I entirely accept that the Government have to make a judgment on that matter. The House will know that I, too, have to make a judgment about the allocation of time. This is supposed to be a Backbench Business Committee day, and there are two Backbench Business Committee debates, the first of which was lost a few weeks ago, and the merits of which will not be disputed. The Leader of the House herself has referred to the important issue of plastics. The second of those debates, in the name of the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), is time-sensitive; it needs to take place today.

However, the Government have chosen to put on two ministerial statements today, which I accept is their right, procedurally, although whether that is altogether popular with the Backbench Business Committee is another matter. I have to make a judgment about balance, and I accept that the statements must take place and that there is interest in them, but we must get on to the Backbench Business Committee debates. More than my recent predecessors, I have tended to try to call everybody on statements, including at business questions; the record proves that beyond peradventure. Sadly, today is an exception, and that is the consequence of the management of the business, which is not in the hands of the Chair. I am trying to fight to defend the rights of Back-Bench Members, and I will always do so. I apologise to disappointed colleagues; they can try another time.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Gentleman's point of order flows specifically from earlier exchanges and therefore, exceptionally, I will take it now if it is brief.

Barry Gardiner: I am grateful, Mr Speaker. At oral questions this morning, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), advised the House that all export licences for military and dual-use goods are examined and issued on a case-by-case basis. In fact, his own Department's website clearly shows that a considerable number of such goods are exported under open general export licences that specifically exempt the exporter from applying on a case-by-case basis. Have you received any request from the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade to come back to the House to correct the record following what I am sure was an inadvertent mistake?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman, the shadow Secretary of State for International Trade, has an air of expectation and a plaintive appeal etched on the contours of his face. The short answer is that I have received no such indication from a Minister, and the hon. Gentleman will not take offence if I say that, on this occasion, I think he was at least as interested in giving his views to the House as in hearing any views put to him. He has placed his concern firmly on the record and, having known the hon. Gentleman for over two decades, I can predict with confidence that he will pursue it with a terrier-like pertinacity.

If there are no further points of order—in fact, there cannot be—we come now to the oral statement from the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Gaming Machines

11.37 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): With permission, I will make a statement on the gambling review and the publication of our response to the consultation on proposals for changes to gaming machines and on social responsibility requirements across the gambling industry.

In October 2016, the Government announced a review of gaming machines and social responsibility measures to ensure that we have the right balance between a sector that can grow and contribute to the economy and one that is socially responsible and doing all it should to protect consumers and communities from harm. Underlying that objective was a deep focus on reducing gambling-related harm, protecting the vulnerable and ensuring that those experiencing problems are getting the help they need. Following a call for evidence, we set out a package of measures in a consultation that was published in October last year. The package included social responsibility measures to minimise the risk of gambling-related harm, covering gambling advertising, online gambling, gaming machines and research, education and treatment.

The consultation ran from 31 October 2017 to 23 January 2018. We received over 7,000 survey responses from a wide range of interested parties and more than 240 submissions of supplementary information and evidence from the public, industry, local authorities, parliamentarians, academics, charities and faith groups. We welcome the responses to the consultation and, in preparing our conclusions, we have reflected on the evidence, concerns and issues that have been raised. We considered the responses alongside advice that we have received from the Gambling Commission and the Responsible Gambling Strategy Board, and we have set out measures on gaming machines, as well as action across online, advertising, research, education and treatment and, more widely, the public health agenda in regard to gambling.

Before I set out the detail of the package of measures, let me say that we acknowledge that millions of people enjoy gambling responsibly and that we are committed to supporting a healthy gambling industry that generates employment and investment. However, over the course of the review I have met many people who have experienced gambling addiction and those who support them, including relatives of those who have sadly lost their loved-ones to suicide as a result of the impact of gambling. In addition, I have visited the incredible treatment services that are there to support addicts. We are clear that gambling can involve a serious risk of harm to individual players, as well as to their families and to the communities they live in, and we must ensure they are protected.

The Government are satisfied with the overall framework of gambling regulation but, as part of our action to build a fairer society and a stronger economy, we believe that when new evidence comes to light, we need to act to target any gambling products or activities that cause concern. It is important to acknowledge that, although gambling-related harm is about more than one product or gambling activity, there is a clear case for the Government to make targeted interventions to tackle the riskiest products, with the objective of reducing harm.

[Tracey Crouch]

One product in particular, B2 gaming machines or fixed odds betting terminals—FOBTs—generated enormous interest throughout the review process. At consultation, we set out the evidence for why we believe targeted intervention is required on B2 gaming machines, and we set out the options for stake reduction. Although overall problem gambling rates have remained unchanged since the Gambling Act 2005, it is clear that consistently high rates of problem gambling remain among players of these machines. Despite action by industry and the regulator, a high proportion of those seeking treatment for gambling addiction identify the machines as their main form of gambling.

According to the latest available data, across Great Britain 11.5% of players of gaming machines in bookmakers are found to be problem gamblers, and a further 32% are considered at risk of harm. In England, 13.6% of players of FOBTs are problem gamblers—the highest rate for any gambling activity. We are concerned that such factors are further amplified by the relationship between the location of B2 gaming machines and areas of high deprivation, with players tending to live in areas with greater levels of income deprivation than the population average. We also know that those who are unemployed are more likely to most often stake £100 than any other socioeconomic group.

Following our analysis of all the evidence and advice we received, we have come to the conclusion that only by reducing the maximum stake from £100 to £2 will we substantially impact on harm to the player and to wider communities. A £2 maximum stake will reduce the ability to suffer high session losses, our best proxy for harm, while also targeting the greatest proportion of problem gamblers. It will mitigate risk for the most vulnerable players, for whom even moderate losses might be harmful. In particular, we note from gaming machine data that, of the 170,000 sessions on B2 roulette machines that ended with losses to the player of over £1,000, none involved average stakes of £2 or below, but losses of that scale still persist at stakes of £5 and £10.

The response to our consultation has been overwhelmingly in support of a significant reduction in B2 stakes. The majority of respondents to the consultation submitted opinions in favour of a £2 limit, indicating strong public approval for this step. I am grateful for the cross-party work on this issue, and I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), the latter having been a very strong supporter of change when he was in government.

Elsewhere in the industry, we are, for the time being, maintaining the status quo across all other gaming machine stakes, prizes and allocations. We have, however, agreed to an uplift for stakes and prizes on prize gaming, which we consider to be sufficiently low risk.

We are aware that the factors that influence the extent of harm to a given player are wider than any one product, and include factors around the player, the product and the environment. The response therefore also sets out action on: increasing player protection measures on other gaming machines on the high street; increasing protections around online gambling, including stronger age verification rules and proposals to require

operators to set limits on a consumer's spending until affordability checks have been conducted; doing more on research, education and treatment of problem gambling, including a review by Public Health England of the evidence relating to the public health harms of gambling; enhancing protections around gambling advertising, including a major multimillion pound advertising campaign led by GambleAware on responsible gambling, to be launched later this year; and filling the gaps in evidence on advertising and harm, with substantial new research commissioned by GambleAware on the effects of gambling advertising and marketing on children, young people and vulnerable groups.

Looking ahead, we will also be considering the issue of 16-year-olds playing national lottery products as part of the next licence competition for the national lottery. We aim to gather evidence on this issue with sufficient time to consider it fully ahead of the next licence competition. Changes to the B2 stake will be effected through regulations in Parliament. The move will need parliamentary approval and, in recognition of the potential impact of this change for betting shops, we will also engage with the gambling industry to ensure it is given sufficient time for implementation.

In conclusion, we want a healthy gambling industry that contributes to the economy, but also one that does all it can to protect players and their families, as well as the wider communities, from harm. We will work with the industry on the impact of these changes and are confident that this innovative sector will step up and help achieve the necessary balance. I commend this statement to the House.

11.45 am

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Good morning to you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of her statement, and I refer hon. Members to my entry in the register.

At the outset, let me warmly congratulate the Minister on her decision today. I am not going to be mealy-mouthed about it: we are absolutely delighted that the Government have decided to deliver a Labour party manifesto pledge. Today, we have had this on FOBTs and yesterday we had the railways taken back into public ownership—it is just a shame we could not make it three with the Leveson inquiry earlier in the week. I genuinely believe this is a great moment; it is the right decision and I applaud the Minister for making it. Having been in government, I know how tricky it is to reach a consensus on these complex regulatory issues, and she deserves recognition from those in all parts of the House for getting this through. We should also recognise that this is a victory for the many people in this House who have led this campaign, particularly my friend, colleague and fellow deputy leader, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who has fought tirelessly for this, alongside other Members, including the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), whom I also regard as a friend.

During this process, we have seen how some parts of the gambling industry have stood in defiance of Ministers, civil servants, parliamentarians, clinicians and other professionals, and have sought to delay at every turn common-sense decisions that would have given comfort to those who have been afflicted by these machines.

There is a lesson in this: if the UK is to retain its reputation for innovative, light-touch regulation and responsible gambling, the wider industry needs to start taking its responsibilities and obligations to players seriously. Any Government, whatever their political hue, will be deeply concerned about the situation we find ourselves in: we have 430,000 gambling addicts; 2 million vulnerable players at risk of developing an addiction; and 25,000 young people who gamble every week. It is incumbent on the industry now to show the Government and Parliament its progress on how it shoulders these responsibilities and uses its £13.8 billion a year yield to deal with harms created by gambling. Across the industry we have global leaders in innovative online gambling products who are seeking solutions to these issues through investment and technology. However, too many household name companies have belligerently denied the facts in front of their noses, so our message today is clear: clean up your act or a future Labour Government will do it for you.

In that spirit of unity and cross-party co-operation, I would like to make a few suggestions to the Minister, if I may—[*Interruption.*] I say that genuinely; there is no need to laugh. We understand there are concerns about revenue reduction, and the Minister has suggested she will increase remote gaming duty to cover this. Would it not be more appropriate to close the loophole that allows British online gambling companies based in Gibraltar to avoid paying tax? Secondly, the Government have chosen not to implement a statutory levy for research, education and treatment at this point, but there was a significant call for that, including from some gambling industry leaders. So will she think again on it, in order to guarantee that resources are available for treatment? Thirdly, we all want addicts to access the most appropriate treatment, so will the Government please start to collect proper data in that area? I have asked a number of questions to Ministers about how many addicts are receiving treatment on the NHS and how much treatment costs the NHS, but we have been told time and time again that the Departments do not hold or collect that data. I am sure we all agree that if we are to understand and better treat this problem, we need better data.

Fourthly, some of the largest companies affected by this decision have argued for restrictions on betting advertising for football in particular. Given that that is also the No. 1 concern expressed by parents, it seems to me that the Government have been hasty in ignoring it.

Finally, our view is that the 2005 Act is no longer fit for purpose. We need a new gambling Act that is fit for the digital age. How draconian that new Act might be is dependent on how the industry chooses to engage with Parliament. We call on the innovative and responsible new leaders of the gambling industry to show us that they take their obligations seriously, and to work with us to alleviate problem gambling.

In conclusion, cutting the maximum stake on FOBTs is a big step in the right direction, but it is just one part of the puzzle. In praising Ministers, I urge the Government to use the new spirit of consensus to introduce a new gambling Act, fit for the purposes of the digital age.

Tracey Crouch: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. Rather than talk about Labour manifestos, perhaps I should remind the House that it was Labour

legislation that caused this issue. However, I will be generous and say that I think it was an unintended consequence of the liberalisation of the gambling industry. I was a staffer in Parliament at that time and clearly remember the significant interest in casinos and supercasinos; much of the discussion about gaming machines was lost in that debate.

The hon. Gentleman raised several key points, starting with the closing of loopholes for operators in Gibraltar. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State reminds me that it was his private Member's Bill on offshore gambling that started the process that led to our changing the legislation to require Gibraltar-based operators to pay their gambling taxes to the Exchequer, so I feel we have already dealt with that issue. While I am referring to the Secretary of State, may I acknowledge his work to progress the response to the review? His support on this issue has been phenomenal and I am incredibly grateful for the work he has done.

We have taken the decision not to introduce a statutory levy at this point. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the comments I have made at various events, when I have referred to this situation as the last-chance saloon. We hope that the work we are doing to reduce FOBT stakes will reduce the vulnerability and the harm, but that is not to say that we do not need to improve treatment services. We are working incredibly hard with the Department of Health and Social Care and Public Health England to gather together the evidence that the hon. Gentleman cites, so that we can get the right treatment services in the right places. We recognise, as do colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care, that treatment services are currently limited, and have perhaps been the Cinderella service in the addictions sphere. We are working on that and have had some great advice from across the clinical spectrum on what we need to do.

On advertising, I fully understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns, and those of others who have raised the issue. Since the publication of the review we have made excellent progress on strengthening the rules on gambling advertising, including the publication by the Committee of Advertising Practice of tough new guidance on how to protect the vulnerable. From June, a responsible gambling message will appear on-screen throughout all TV gambling adverts, not just at the end, and the Gambling Commission has already consulted on expanding the sanctions for breaching the advertising code. There is much more to come, including the advertising campaign to which I referred, as well as the work to look into how we can protect children that will be done later this year. We are also going to have some research on the effect of marketing and advertising on children and young people. Although we may not have made that tough decision now, it is certainly not a closed issue.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I rise simply to congratulate my right hon. and hon. Friends on arriving at this decision. This campaign has embraced all the House, including the hon. Members for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who have joined in the efforts, so this is not a day for party political comments. I simply say that back in 2005 many Members from all parties were concerned about the legislation that was going through, not just on gaming machines but

[Mr Iain Duncan Smith]

on supercasinos. Does my hon. Friend agree that notwithstanding the fact that there are people in this House who believe this is an issue of choice, when there is clear evidence that normal choice is bent by addiction and by the addictive level in the way that people exercise their choice, that is when Government should step in? This is not about the nanny state; this is about righting a wrong and helping those who need help.

Tracey Crouch: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend. As I said in my opening statement, this is not about one particular product, although what we are doing is targeting intervention on the most harmful product, and the most harmful product on our high streets at the moment is the fixed odds betting terminal.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the Minister for an advance copy of her statement.

I welcome the announcement by the Government to reduce the maximum unit stake on FOBTs to £2 per spin. This is something that I have strongly campaigned for in my role as vice-chair of the all-party group on FOBTs, alongside other MPs, such as the extremely hard-working chair of the all-party group, the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith).

I praise the Minister for her action on this issue and her acknowledgement of what harm these machines do. I do not believe that we would have achieved this outcome without her continued efforts in persuading her colleagues of the need for action on gambling-related harm.

Gambling-related harm is an issue that rightly continues to receive more attention. It is vital that the Government continue to listen to the many people, such as Dr Henrietta Bowden-Jones, and the organisations that are highlighting how gambling is becoming more prevalent, especially among young people. According to the Gambling Commission's statistics, more than half a million children are gambling every week. Therefore, I am glad to hear the Minister say that gambling-related harm is about more than any one product or gambling activity and that the Government intend to enhance protection around gambling advertising, including a major multi-million pound advertising campaign. I welcome the fact that this campaign promotes responsible gambling.

I acknowledge the comments that the Minister made earlier in response to the Opposition that education to prevent gambling-related harm has to be funded. I believe that to fund such education, to promote social responsibility and to safeguard vulnerable groups, the Government should introduce a statutory levy on bookmakers to fund GambleAware and its activities to tackle gambling-related harm.

I welcome today's announcement and hope that common sense and cross-party collaboration can continue in this area. I ask the Minister to work with the Scottish Government on any legislation that may already be devolved, or may be more appropriate to be devolved, to ensure the success of this proposal. Hopefully, this can be a platform to implement more legislation to help those affected by gambling and those who may become problem gamblers.

Tracey Crouch: It was remiss of me not to acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's work on this cross-party campaign and I do apologise for that. I thank him for mentioning the work of Dr Henrietta Bowden-Jones, because having that kind of clinical expertise and real insight into the effect of addictions has been enormously helpful.

As I said earlier, we have ruled out a statutory levy at this point, but not forever. We have seen from the voluntary levy a 16% increase in the amount of money going into research, education and treatment, and we hope that from the measures that we introduce today, we will reduce the harm and that we will therefore see a significant rebalancing of the income from the levy with the treatment and the services.

On the hon. Gentleman's final point, I had the pleasure of speaking with the Minister from the Scottish Government, and I have assured her that we are very happy to work closely together in respect of the devolved legislation that may or may not be required.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It has come to something when Members of this House, particularly those on the Labour Benches, cheer when a decision is made that will put up to 20,000 decent working-class people out of their jobs when there is no evidence to do so. That was even admitted by Adrian Parkinson who ran the Campaign for Fairer Gambling and who, last week, wrote an article in *The Daily Telegraph* saying that there was actually no evidence behind the campaign that he was running, which has taken in all these Members across the House. By how much has the Minister's Department estimated that the problem gambling rate in this country will reduce as a result of this decision, and what evidence does she have for making that estimate?

Tracey Crouch: Some 176,000 people who play FOBTs are problem gamblers, which is currently the highest rate of gambling activity by product. We respect and understand that this decision may well have an impact on jobs in bookmakers, but we have addressed the harm of fixed odds betting terminals and we are working very closely with the industry to support bookmakers to continue to be able to grow and contribute to the economy. On the impact on problem gamblers, we expect this decision to have a significant impact on the reduction of problem gambling.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I rise to be completely non-partisan and to beg your indulgence, Mr Speaker, and that of the Minister, while I say a heartfelt thank you on behalf of the very many thousands of people who have contacted me to say that these machines have destroyed their lives or the lives of those they love and taken away their homes, their dignity, their self-respect. I also say thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), a fellow Labour deputy leader, to the Secretary of State and to the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), and a very special thank you to my friend—he is indeed a friend and has been a dear friend to me over this issue—the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). On behalf of everyone whose lives they have made so much better today, I thank them all.

Tracey Crouch: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, who has been a stalwart campaigner on this issue. As she pointed out, this is not just about individuals; it is about their families and the communities they live in, which is why it was important we took this decision.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is most welcome that the Government have recognised that my father's weekly pools coupon, my mother's visit to the bingo hall and my aunt's gambling, which, with working-class lyricism, she described as her "flutter on the gee-gees" were a far cry from the brutalising effects of these gambling machines. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State, who met me and others, and to his ministerial team for doing the right thing, rather than the easy thing. Will they now do the right thing by taking a very close look at online gambling and particularly online gambling that targets young children by using cartoon images and other devices to draw them in? This is an urgent matter. As Members on both sides of the Chamber have said, this is about social responsibility, and social responsibility is not the preserve of any one party in the House.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is absolutely right that a great deal of further work needs to be done to protect vulnerable people, particularly children, from the harm of online gambling. We are looking at all those issues, and I expect the Gambling Commission to take a robust look at some of those he raises.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister and all those Members who have fought consistently for this decision, but she, like me, will know that there is also B3 content on machines in betting shops, and reducing the stake to £2 on the B2 content means people can now lose money faster on the B3 content. What will she do to research that fact and to make sure that people do not just migrate to the B3 content and that the problem does not thereby continue?

Tracey Crouch: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. We continue to monitor B3 gaming machines—we are concerned about their growth—and to consider increased player protection measures. We continue to keep this category of machine, along with everything else, under review.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome the Government's decision to cut the maximum permissible stake for B2 machines, but on what empirical research did the Minister base her decision to go so much further than the recommendation of the Gambling Commission that £30 or below would offer the necessary protection?

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who started on this journey with me three years ago. We received a significant amount of evidence. The Gambling Commission actually recommended a cut to between £2 and £30, and we have gone to the lowest end, because that is what we think will most reduce harm.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Minister has told us that when new evidence comes to light, we need to act to target any gambling products that cause concern. Will she look at the problems of online gambling

emerging through young people playing video games and third-party websites selling items from so-called loot boxes? Belgium is the latest country to take action. What are the Government doing to work with the industry to tackle this issue?

Tracey Crouch: Quite simply, what is illegal offline should be illegal online. The Gambling Commission is live to this issue and is looking at it closely. We expect it to maintain close sight of the emerging issues regarding vulnerability and gambling being targeted at children.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of the impact that these measures might have on online gambling, especially problem online gambling?

Tracey Crouch: The whole review was about reducing the harm caused by problem gambling. This is not just about one particular product. We are looking at the whole suite of products, including online gambling, and that is why we have set out a full package of measures to help ensure that we have a socially responsible gambling sector.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): May I join others in personally congratulating the Minister? This announcement is a considerable personal achievement for her, and she should be very proud of it. My concern relates to the impact on people's mental health and, indeed, the number of people who lose their lives as a result of gambling addiction. Will she think again about the case for a statutory levy on the basis of the principle that the polluter should pay? The cause of the damage is so significant that there seems to be a powerful case for the industry to contribute to the cost of treatment.

Tracey Crouch: I share the right hon. Gentleman's views on the connection between mental health and gambling. I met a significant number of gambling addicts who had contemplated suicide, in part because of the problem that they faced. It was desperately sad to hear those stories. We are working with Public Health England and the Department of Health and Social Care to improve research, education and treatment, and we will continue to ensure that the industry continues to pay what it should pay to support those services.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I warmly congratulate the Minister on reducing the fixed odds betting terminals stake to £2, given the damage they do to family life and the huge waste of police time involved. May I express the hope that this decision heralds her Department also doing the right thing regarding the scourge of junk food advertising to children that we will need to deal with shortly?

Tracey Crouch: My hon. Friend serves on the Health Committee and I know that he heard some significant evidence from a professor about the impact of gambling addiction, particularly on suicide rates among young men. I am grateful for his support.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Has the Minister seen this morning's statement from the British Horseracing Authority, which says that it understands the need to tackle problem gambling, but also points

[Conor McGinn]

out the unique relationship between betting and racing? Will the Government outline how they will mitigate any potential financial loss to our great sport, and does the Minister agree that a responsible recreational flutter on the gee-gees is to be enjoyed—and, indeed, is enjoyed—by millions of people across the country?

Tracey Crouch: Many people bet on horses day in, day out, and do so incredibly responsibly. I assure the House that the Secretary of State would not have allowed anything to go ahead that had an impact on horse-racing or race courses. We will be working closely with the BHA, its chairman and its chief executive on how we can take forward this work. The Secretary of State has today written to the BHA to work through some of the transitional issues, and we continue to support horse-racing first and foremost.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): May I thank the Minister for today's announcement of the £2 stake and the Secretary of State for his personal determination to do what is right by vulnerable families affected by problem gambling? Some 2.3 million people self-identify as problem gamblers. The Minister said that the Department is working with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that treatment services are available. Will Ministers also work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, local councils and charities to ensure that the most comprehensive support services are available to those problem gamblers who need it most?

Tracey Crouch: We will work with all partners that help to reduce the harm of problem gambling. It is worth referencing the fact that it was the local authorities—led by the London Borough of Newham—that responded to this issue by calling for the stake to be reduced to £2.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I was pleased that the Minister mentioned the relationship between the location of B2 gaming machines and areas of high deprivation. In the three Hull constituencies, some £9.1 million was lost in 2015-16 on fixed odds betting terminals. Does more need to be done in our schools to raise awareness of gambling addiction?

Tracey Crouch: As the hon. Lady knows, I am very familiar with Hull and its areas of deprivation. There are similar aspects in my constituency, where I have seen an increase in the number of bookmakers and a proliferation of these machines in deprived communities. We are always happy to work across the board with departmental partners to increase understanding and awareness of gambling harm, and we will also do that through wider work beyond schools on advertising.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I warmly congratulate the Minister on her personal commitment to this and all those who have campaigned so hard. This is a great day. I know that the Minister recognises the devastating mental health consequences of gambling addiction. This also has to be about protecting those who are struggling with their mental health at the moment and in the future, so will she meet me to discuss the next stages of the review?

Tracey Crouch: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. I was struck by the Committee's report on suicide, because in previous work on that really sad subject, gambling addiction has not really been highlighted as a potential concern. I am happy to meet and discuss that further.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Credit cards amount to 10% to 20% of online deposits, effectively funding gambling by borrowing, which we all know can lead to unsustainable debt and further mental health problems. Will the Minister consider banning credit card betting?

Tracey Crouch: As part of the further work that the Gambling Commission will be doing on online gambling harms, it will consider whether gambling using credit cards online should continue to be permitted. We will work to develop a more detailed understanding of that issue and the associated risks of gambling on credit.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Many Islanders are very grateful for this decision by the Minister and the Secretary of State, and I welcome it strongly. Is the Minister aware that on the Isle of Wight more than £19.9 million was lost on these wretched machines between 2008 and 2016? Does she agree that there are many better ways of spending that money? Does she also agree that the gambling industry, in its almost parasitic reliance on these wretched fixed odds betting terminals, has shown itself not to be as responsible as, frankly, it should be?

Tracey Crouch: I am always grateful for support from the Island. I was not aware of those specific statistics, but I am not surprised. We will continue to work with everybody to ensure that we create a responsible gambling industry.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): In the House, we are sometimes divided, but I commend the Minister for this action, which we will look back on as a major step forward in public health. In my city of Glasgow, £35 million a year is frittered away on FOBTs. When will the regulations come before Parliament? In the face of a very aggressive campaign by the Association of British Bookmakers, we need to stand firm on this major public health issue.

Tracey Crouch: I know that you, Mr Speaker, and other Members of the House will recognise that there is a process that we have to go through. We expect the regulations to come before the House later this year, with reasonable implementation time following that. I hope the hon. Gentleman will understand that there is a parliamentary process that we have to go through, but today we are pleased to announce the policy that the maximum stake will be reduced from £100 to £2.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I strongly welcome this announcement, which addresses an issue that has destroyed far too many lives. I appreciate that advertising is regulated, but we have all noticed the dramatic increase in gambling advertising online and on TV, preying on the vulnerable. What more can we do to address that?

Tracey Crouch: There has been significant progress since the review started, and we will see some significant differences as the year progresses. We have had some firm conversations about the tone and style of gambling adverts, including in-play gambling and “bet now” adverts. A lot of work has been done by the Committee of Advertising Practice to ensure that we work on tone and content and try to reduce some of the harm done by gambling adverts.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I declare an interest: in the '80s and early '90s, I worked in high street betting shops. I very much welcome this announcement. The betting industry has warned that the £2 stake for FOBTs will result in thousands of betting shops closing and up to 21,000 job losses. Does the Minister agree that if outlets do close, it is because they were open specifically to house these machines, and that the real danger to jobs in the bookmaking industry is the deployment of self-service betting terminals?

Tracey Crouch: It is only fair that I inform the House that a significant number of people who work in bookmakers called for us to make these stake reductions or ban these machines altogether because they have seen a change in customer behaviour in betting shops. The addiction of many people to these machines has led to violence and intimidating behaviour towards members of staff, sometimes in single-staffed bookmakers.

While we recognise that there may well be an impact on jobs, we will work closely with colleagues across Government and with partner organisations to ensure that we support members of staff. We are seeing a shift in the way that gambling is done, and there has been significant consolidation within the industry. This industry is changing, regardless of today's announcement, but we want to ensure that we support the safety of staff.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Before I became a Member of Parliament, I met the then Secretary of State at the Hamworthy Club in Merley, which happens to be the cricket club that I play for, to discuss this very issue with local residents who were concerned about fixed odds betting terminals, and in particular their impact on vulnerable young men. I warmly welcome the statement and the impact that this

will have on some of the most vulnerable in our society who are prone to problem gambling as a result of these machines.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support. That is why we did this. We had to balance the interests of an industry that is an important contributor to the economy with the harm caused by these machines, which have blighted many people's lives.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I am pleased to add my congratulations to the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and the other campaigners. The Minister mentioned the devolved Administrations. Can she assure me that there have been conversations with the Welsh Government? It would be truly awful if this measure did not apply at the same time and in the same way in Wales, through the Wales Act 2017. We do not want to be discriminated against because we live on the better side of Offa's Dyke.

Tracey Crouch: I assure the hon. Lady that those conversations have taken place, and the Welsh Government were involved in parts of the consultation prior to the announcement.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I add my congratulations to the Minister and to everyone who has campaigned for this change. Reducing the maximum stake to £2 will provide more protection for those with a gambling addiction and some of the most vulnerable in our society. I also welcome the Minister's comments about looking into online gambling. Is she prepared to say specifically what the Government might do to reduce the stakes in online games such as blackjack, where a phenomenal amount of money can also be lost very quickly?

Tracey Crouch: The hon. Lady is right, and that is why we are asking the Gambling Commission to look at online gambling. Online gambling is evolving incredibly quickly, and we need to ensure that we have the right player protections in place online, as we do on the high street. In many respects, it is easier to track play and understand player behaviour online than on the high street. We continue to take a robust look at online gambling.

Building Regulations and Fire Safety

12.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the publication of Dame Judith Hackitt's final report following her independent review of building regulations and fire safety.

Members will be aware that my predecessor and the then Home Secretary asked Dame Judith to carry out the review following the Grenfell Tower fire. We are approaching one year on from that tragic event, and those affected are firmly in our minds. I met some of the bereaved and survivors as soon as I could after I was appointed, and that strengthened my determination to ensure that they continue to receive the support they need and that we learn from this tragedy, so that nothing like it can ever happen again. With this in mind, Dame Judith was asked to undertake her review of the existing system as part of a comprehensive response to the fire. I want to pay tribute to Dame Judith and all those who contributed to this important report.

The report's publication is a watershed for everyone who has a stake in ensuring that the people living in buildings like Grenfell Tower are safe—and feel safe. Dame Judith is clear that the current system, developed over many years under successive Governments, is not fit for purpose. She is calling for major reform and a change of culture, with the onus more clearly on everyone involved to manage the risks they create at every stage, and Government doing more to set and enforce high standards. The Government agree with that assessment and support the principles behind the report's recommendations for a new system. We agree with the call for greater clarity and accountability over who is responsible for building safety during the construction, refurbishment and ongoing management of high-rise homes.

The Hackitt review has shown that in too many cases people who should be accountable for fire safety have failed in their duties. In future, the Government will ensure that those responsible for a building must demonstrate that they have taken decisive action to reduce building safety risks, and that they will be held to account. We agree that the system should be overseen by a more effective regulatory framework, including stronger powers to inspect high-rise buildings and sanctions to tackle irresponsible behaviour. We agree that there should be no buck-passing between different parts of the industry and that everyone needs to work together to change the system. Crucially, given the concerns raised following the Grenfell tragedy, we agree that residents must be empowered with relevant information. They must be able to act to make their homes safer.

This review has implications for Government as a whole. I am committing today to bring forward legislation that delivers meaningful and lasting change and gives residents a much stronger voice in an improved system of fire safety. Changing the law will take time, but, as Dame Judith acknowledges, we can—and must—start changing the culture and practice right now. As a first step, we are asking everyone involved to have their say on how we can achieve this by contacting us by the end of July. Their response will inform a more detailed

statement to the House in the autumn on how we intend to implement the new regulatory system. I will also update the House on progress before the summer recess.

We all have a role to play. For our part, the Government have accepted and have been implementing the recommendations that relate to us since Dame Judith published her interim report in December. First, we are consulting on significantly restricting or banning the use of desktop studies to assess cladding systems. Inappropriate use of desktop studies is unacceptable, and I will not hesitate to ban them if the consultation, which closes on 25 May, does not demonstrate that they can be used safely.

Secondly, we are working with industry to clarify building regulations fire safety guidance, and I will publish this for consultation in July. Let me be clear: the cladding believed to be on Grenfell Tower was unlawful under existing building regulations. It should not have been used. I will ensure that there is no room for doubt over what materials can be used safely in cladding of high-rise residential buildings. Having listened carefully to concerns, the Government will consult on banning the use of combustible materials in cladding systems on high-rise residential buildings.

Thirdly, we will work with the industry to make the wider suite of building regulations guidance more user-friendly.

All this continues our work to ensure that people are safe. Since the Grenfell tragedy, my Department has worked with fire and rescue services, local authorities and landlords to identify high-rise buildings with unsafe cladding, ensure that interim measures are in place to reduce risks and give building owners clear advice about what they need to do over the longer term to make buildings safe.

In addition, I am issuing a direction today to all local housing authorities to pay particular regard to cladding-related issues when reviewing housing in their areas. Remediation work has started on two thirds of buildings in the social housing sector, and we have called on building owners in the private sector to follow the example set by the social sector and not pass costs on to leaseholders. I find it outrageous that some private sector landlords have been slow to co-operate with us on this vital work. I am calling on them to do the right thing. If they do not, I am not ruling anything out at this stage.

As the Prime Minister announced yesterday, the Government will fully fund the removal and replacement of potentially dangerous cladding by social landlords, with costs estimated at £400 million. This will ensure that landlords can focus their efforts on making ACM—aluminium composite material—cladding systems safe for the buildings they own. We want to allocate this funding for remediation as soon as possible. We will announce more details shortly, including how we will encourage landlords to continue to pursue other parties for costs where they are responsible or at fault. We will also continue to offer financial flexibilities for local authorities that need to undertake essential fire safety work.

We must create a culture that truly puts people, and their safety, first—that inspires confidence and, yes, rebuilds public trust. Dame Judith's review and the significant changes that will flow from it are important

first steps, helping us to ensure that when we say, “Never again”, we mean it. I commend this statement to the House.

12.25 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement this morning. I join him in thanking Dame Judith Hackitt and her team for all the work that they have done on this review. This is, as she says, a complex and confusing area.

Our building safety system catastrophically failed the residents of Grenfell Tower and has proved to be comprehensively flawed when over 300 other tower blocks around the country are wrapped in the same dangerous, unsafe cladding. Dame Judith said this morning:

“This is a broken system and it needs to be fixed.”

But while there are some welcome reforms in her report, it will not do that. Why no ban on combustible cladding and insulation? It really beggars belief that the report continues to give a green light to combustible materials on high-rise blocks. I say to the Secretary of State: do not consult on it—do it. Seventy-two people died in Grenfell Tower. Australia had a high-rise fire in 2014; it now has a ban. Dubai had a high-rise fire in 2015; it has a ban. We must do the same. We owe it to the Grenfell residents and we owe it to residents living today in other tower blocks with the same Grenfell-style cladding. The Secretary of State was here yesterday when MPs on both sides of the House argued for this. Even Dame Judith Hackitt was reported this morning as saying that she would support the Secretary of State if he did this just after ruling it out, of course, in her own report.

There are some steps that Dame Judith recommends that are welcome and that would help, such as clearer duties on those responsible for building safety and new ways for residents to have their concerns heard and acted on. I have to say, however, that too many sections of this report read like an industry insider urging reform without rocking the boat, referring to “culture change”, “clearer guidance”, a “less prescriptive system” and “greater responsibility” from some of those who have been cutting corners to cut costs in the current system.

I say to the Secretary of State that this is a missed opportunity to set clear-cut new standards that ensure that a disaster like Grenfell Tower can never happen again. With regard to what is not in this report, will he explain why and what he is going to do about those matters? They include not only having no ban on combustible cladding systems, but having no bar on desktop studies for safety clearance without testing, no plan for fitting sprinklers, no timetable for new safety regulations in legislation and no powers or tough enough sanctions to compel private block owners to get fire tests done and then get vital safety work done.

The Secretary of State cannot simply hold this report at arm's length and say it is out for comment and consultation. This review was commissioned by the Government, with a chair picked by the Government, working with support from Government staff. He says that in principle he accepts the recommendations. While I agree that he can endorse some of the recommendations, he must reject others that fall short and he must act where recommendations are missing. If all he does in practice is accept the recommendations, the division of opinion in this House will not be between his side and

ours, but between both sides and his Front Bench. This is not a matter of party politics; it is a matter of public safety, public confidence and, above all, a national response that measures up to the tragedy—the national tragedy—of the Grenfell Tower fire.

James Brokenshire: While I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's kind comments on the words of Dame Judith and her team in what I think is a comprehensive report—looking at the end-to-end system and at culture, but also making recommendations on strong enforcement and criminal sanctions—I urge him to look at it very carefully before rushing to judgment on all its different sections. He may not agree with certain sections, and he is entitled to take that view, but I think he will recognise the real intent of someone who is independent and has significant health and safety experience to bring about a shift in a system that, as we mutually accept, is not fit for purpose.

This report will no doubt be subject to further debate, and it is important that there is time for feedback on each of the different recommendations and points that are made, because of the complexity, depth and detail of them, so that we get this right. With a shared sense of what is cross-party and what is cross-community, that is absolutely what we want to achieve. That is why it is important to get feedback on and input into the report's recommendations.

I underline this Government's seriousness of intent. That is why I have today said that we will consult on the banning of combustible materials—I look forward to bringing the details to the House in due course—and why I have said what I have about desktop studies. I want to inject a sense of pace into the process. I have acknowledged that the legislation that may flow from this will take time, and we want to work with parties across the House to ensure that it is got right. Equally, however, I recognise that there are steps that may not require legislation that we should get on and take, and I am committed to taking that forward as Secretary of State.

I encourage Members on both sides of the House to look carefully at Dame Judith's comprehensive recommendations. They should recognise that, on the issue of cladding systems, she acknowledges:

“A clearer, more transparent and more effective specification and testing regime of construction products must be developed. This should include products as they are put together as part of a system.”

We also recognise that, and we are bringing forward the consultation I have announced in my statement today so that we can actually make the difference we all want by making these changes and ensuring that our system and our high-rise buildings are safe.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I also welcome him to his new role, in which I know he will perform admirably.

Many of us representing constituencies in London, who were hugely shocked by what happened at Grenfell, have people living in high-rise blocks in our communities, who will be affected by the actions that now need to be taken. I welcome the announcement yesterday of the additional £400 million for local authorities and housing associations. Will he set out what processes are in place for getting that resourcing to local councils?

[Justine Greening]

May I also encourage my right hon. Friend to look at the fact that many councils, such as Wandsworth, are spending much more resourcing than goes purely on the work that needs to be done to replace the cladding on buildings such as Sudbury House in my constituency, including the expense of sprinklers? As he said, it is important that as well as being safe, people also feel safe. Over the coming weeks and months, will he reflect on those costs and local authorities' liability for them?

James Brokenshire: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question. I do understand the concerns that Members on both sides of the House, including those in London, understandably have following the appalling tragedy of Grenfell. I can tell her that we will be providing details for local authorities and housing associations about how they can access the funding. We are working at pace to ensure that the relevant information and guidance is given, because I am certainly very conscious that we want to allocate the funding for remediation as soon as possible. I will announce more details shortly.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. As he knows, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee is taking evidence from Dame Judith this afternoon. Once we have heard from her and had a chance to read the report in detail, I am sure the Select Committee will want to let him have our comments, and we will pass them on before the deadline of 25 July that he has set for such comments to be received.

May I ask about the specific issue of combustible materials used in cladding on high-rise buildings? Shortly after the interim report, the Select Committee called for such materials to be banned. We took up that issue with Dame Judith, and we wrote to the then Secretary of State and other Ministers about it. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is now going to consult on banning combustible materials. Will the consultation on a ban apply to regulations for new buildings and the refurbishment of existing buildings, or does he intend to apply the regulations retrospectively to all existing buildings, so that if the consultation goes in such a direction, combustible materials will be taken off all existing buildings to make people safe?

James Brokenshire: I certainly recognise the importance of the contribution made by the Select Committee on these issues and of the hon. Gentleman's points. I note that Dame Judith is providing further evidence this afternoon, and I look forward to hearing from the Committee about its recommendations.

The point is that we firmly want to consult on the issue of combustible materials because of the concerns that the hon. Gentleman and others, including in the industry, have raised. I will come forward with further details, and I will obviously publish the details of the consultation's scale and extent. The clear intent is to ensure that there are not combustible materials on buildings—fire safety issues are of paramount importance in what we are doing—and I will certainly reflect further and carefully on the points that the hon. Gentleman has made.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): This is a technical report by a leading technician, but it has a glaring omission. For the public and indeed for the people in Grenfell to have confidence in any new system, all combustible materials in external cladding and insulation must be banned. Anything less will not do. I really welcome the tone and substance of what the Secretary of State has said, but I hope he will take this opportunity for a cross-party initiative to ensure that this kind of thing never happens again.

James Brokenshire: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. I am in no doubt about the strength of feeling that he expresses. Such strength of feeling exists not just in the House but outside, which is why I judge it right that we consult on this issue and take it forward in the way I have outlined. I look forward to advancing the consultation and to hearing the responses.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Not only is it nearly a year since the Grenfell disaster, but it is nine years since the Lakanal fire, which should have set alarm bells ringing about the weakness of building regulation. The Hackitt review is strong in its critique of regulatory failure, but it is profoundly disappointing in the strength of the recommendations it makes. I do not understand—perhaps the Secretary of State will help us to understand—how Dame Judith can this morning be reported as saying that she would support a Government ban on the use of combustible materials, but the report does not actually include such a direct recommendation. Will he take this opportunity to mark the anniversary of Grenfell by making it clear, early enough, that there will be an unambiguous ban? Will he cut through the confusion, and make that a proper memorial to those who died?

James Brokenshire: I understand the hon. Lady's point. Dame Judith is independent, but her recommendations set out the end-to-end cultural and systemic change that it is important to take forward. I have already pointed to her recommendations about looking for greater clarity on specification, and by consulting in the way I have set out, we are taking that forward and reflecting her concerns. I hope that the hon. Lady will acknowledge what I said about the need to clarify building regulations for fire safety guidance, and as I have said, we will be publishing revised and clarified versions of that guidance for consultation in July.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): May I welcome the positive and constructive tone of my right hon. Friend's statement? Knowing him, I know that he intends to deliver on it fully. As a former Fire Services Minister, may I associate myself with the former Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), given where our experience leads both of us in relation to combustible materials? The Minister made a welcome comment about owners of private blocks who will not step up to their moral responsibilities and shoulder the cost, and I was glad to hear him say that he rules nothing out. Will he keep in close contact with those of us whose constituents, such as mine in Northpoint House in Bromley, may be faced with a situation where the owners will not, or financially cannot, fulfil those responsibilities, and will he see that leaseholders are not left without any recourse?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and important point about the private sector and remediation, and as I said, I find unacceptable the attitude that has been shown by a number of owners of private blocks. I intend to convene roundtables urgently to make that point crystal clear, and to hear the solutions that are being advanced. As I said, I rule nothing out.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The lack of support in Dame Judith's report for a ban on combustible materials is profoundly disappointing. The Royal Institute of British Architects, whose members specify building materials, supports a ban and is clear that it is not incompatible with the wider change in regulatory framework recommended by Dame Judith. A ban is already in place in many other countries. Survivors of Grenfell, relatives of those who died, and thousands of residents who are currently living in fear in tower blocks across the country are relying on this report to deliver the step change to the construction industry that is needed to keep people safe and rebuild trust. A ban on materials that are developed to make a profit for their manufacturers, but that do not keep members of the public safe in their beds at night, is essential if we are to rebuild that trust. Will the Secretary of State be unequivocal in his acknowledgment that the report as published does not do that job and is not acceptable? Will he ensure that a ban is introduced without further delay?

James Brokenshire: I have made my position clear: the report does an excellent job in setting out end-to-end and regulatory issues, specifically in the point about clarification. That is why I made a clear statement of intent about the consultation on banning combustible material. I have listened carefully; I heard the debate in the House yesterday, where a number of these points were raised. It is important to take this step, get on with the consultation, and ensure that we follow this through.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): My right hon. Friend is obviously coming under a lot of pressure to ban combustible materials on high-rise buildings, but this excellent report does not do that because it would give a false assurance that that one shot would somehow make everything okay, when it would not. Combustible materials are used in all kinds of buildings and all kinds of capacities, but they do not necessarily mean that those buildings are dangerous.

This report represents the importing of an aviation safety culture into the buildings industry, which is probably long overdue. I look forward to a recommendation, perhaps in the Moore-Bick inquiry, that there should be independent incident investigations to ensure that lessons from incidents such as the Lakanal House fire are learned much more comprehensively than they have been in the past. Will the Minister assure the House that the legislation he brings forward will wait until the Moore-Bick inquiry has reported?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes an important point about this not being some sort of box-ticking exercise, and about the need to assess—as the report does—different systems that operate around the world, including the benefits and weaknesses of prescriptive or outcomes-based frameworks. There is also the whole issue of safety cases, and about who bears responsibility all the way through the chain, and Dame Judith is right

in understanding the need for an effective system. I want feedback from all sides of the House on how we take the issue forward, because it matters that we have a system that is effective and works.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Secretary of State is making the same sort of noises as were made after the Lakanal House fire. A date of 25 July takes us beyond the recess, and means that we will not get a statement about the end of the consultation until September at the earliest, or possibly October. Will he bring forward the end of his consultation so that we can hold his feet to the fire and ensure that we deal with this in a timely manner? The least we can expect is a ban on combustible materials as a testament to the people who died in that fire.

James Brokenshire: I say firmly and fairly to the hon. Gentleman that I intend to make progress. I am certainly not intending to delay or drag things out, which is why I said that I intend to come before the House before the summer recess to give a further update. However, given the nature and complexity of the report, it is right that there is an appropriate time to get feedback on legislation and things that will take time, without delaying where we can actually make progress.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): The all-party fire safety rescue group is delighted that Dame Judith's report has now been published and we can get some action. I welcome my right hon. Friend's approach to this issue, but he knows only too well that our group will not shut up until the consultation period has closed and we get a ban on combustible cladding. He did not seem to say anything about sprinklers in the statement, so I wonder if he could address that.

James Brokenshire: I am sure that my hon. Friend will continue to make powerful points on behalf of the APPG. I welcome that and the undoubted challenge and input that that will bring. Our advice on sprinklers is clear: for new blocks over 30 metres in height, statutory guidance states that sprinklers should be fitted. For existing buildings, it is for the building owner to decide whether to retrofit. Sprinklers can be an effective fire safety measure, but they are one of many such measures that could be adopted and, as Dame Judith Hackitt points out in her report, no single fire safety measure, including sprinklers, can be seen as a panacea.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): There is nothing wrong with what is in the Hackitt review; it is what is not in there. We do need a change to processes, systems and culture, but we also need to give confidence now to residents living in high-rise buildings where cladding is being replaced. Yes, we do want a ban on combustible materials and guidance on sprinklers and on means of escape. Dame Judith concludes that prescriptive controls alone are not adequate. That may be right, but we do need prescriptive controls, so in the consultation will the Secretary of State take advice from professional bodies not just on combustible materials, and will the Government listen to that advice and respond as quickly as possible?

James Brokenshire: We will listen carefully to all inputs. The hon. Gentleman's fundamental point is about reassurance and people feeling safe in their homes.

[James Brokenshire]

That point is certainly not lost on me. That is why I have said the things I have said today, welcoming and acknowledging the important steps outlined by Dame Judith in her report but equally commenting on a number of other issues as well and on how we are able to make further progress and deliver that overarching safety agenda to which the hon. Gentleman rightly points.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Many of my constituents in Chelmsford travel to London every day and go to work in high-rise buildings. Can the Secretary of State confirm that any new measures for safety and its enforcement will be considered for high-rise office blocks as well as for residential blocks? People should be as safe at work as they are at home.

James Brokenshire: Many of the report's recommendations are intended to apply only to high-rise residential buildings, but as Dame Judith says the ideas proposed in her report have a broader application, to a wider range of buildings. We will consider that further. I am sure that we will receive further feedback from stakeholders and consider that when we come to this in the autumn.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Like others, I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has made it clear that he will rule nothing out when it comes to forcing action on private freehold developments such as New Capital Quay in Greenwich. That represents progress. May I test whether he understands the urgent need to break the impasse on such developments? Leaseholders are living with not only the anxiety about the long-term costs of remediation, but the daily mounting costs of interim fire safety measures and the fear that they live in homes that are still surrounded by lethal material.

James Brokenshire: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes about the uncertainty and the cost of interim measures that may be put in place. One developer in Croydon has done the right thing: Barratt Developments has told residents of the Cityscape flats that it will cover fire safety and cladding costs. The message is that others should be doing the same.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I am conscious that it is very difficult to define combustibility in technical terms, so can my right hon. Friend reassure me that during the consultation he will be cognisant of the standards that underpin the words we use? One may say that something is non-combustible, but it can be combustible in certain circumstances. So we want to push towards a ban on our general understanding of combustibility, but that must be underpinned by a definition of the standards behind that.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a point about the complexity and technical nature of this issue. I am sure we will reflect carefully as part of the consultation.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): While welcoming Dame Judith's recommendations, the new regulatory framework and the sanctions, criminal and otherwise, there is disappointment about some of the

omissions this morning. The Secretary of State has done his very best to plug those gaps, but the Government have been promising to revise Approved Document B since 2011. Dame Judith recommends a revision of all the Approved Documents—A to Q. How much longer is this going to take? Will he consider suggesting the relocation of the fire safety regulation and enforcement team from the Home Office to his Department, where it can sit alongside the housing and building regulations section, which seems to be a much better fit?

James Brokenshire: I am sure that a number of points will be raised during the consultation. The hon. Gentleman has just raised one. On Approved Document B, we have already consulted on changes to that. I can tell him that we intend to complete that work and publish a clarified version of the guidance by July.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and Dame Judith's report. The construction industry is quite wide and diverse. I note that in the report Dame Judith comments that minimum standards were sometimes seen as "a high bar to be negotiated down".

Does he agree that we need the construction industry to look at the report to see what it can do to implement the outcomes?

James Brokenshire: I agree, which is why I made the point that there are responsibilities on all of us. I have set out a number of actions that the Government are taking but there is also a responsibility on the industry itself. Some of the very powerful comments Dame Judith makes in her report require action not just by the Government but by industry and others.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Will the Secretary of State ensure that there are effective sanctions in building regulations to make sure that those who cut corners in the pursuit of profit are held to account and to provide an effective deterrent? Will he look again at the recent London Assembly report that recommended the installation of sprinklers? It is not good enough to leave it to owners of existing buildings to determine whether to take action. Why is it right that hotel guests are protected by sprinklers, where evidence shows they can eradicate the risk of death, while high-rise occupants are not so protected?

James Brokenshire: I encourage the right hon. Gentleman to look at chapter two of the final report, which sets out a number of different steps on enforcement:

"Failure by relevant dutyholders to comply with either type of notice"—

there is a prohibition or stop notice and an improvement notice—

"would be a criminal offence."

When he reads the report in detail, I think he will see the seriousness and robustness of Dame Judith's recommendations and therefore the changes that need to happen.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the fact that he has gone a significant step further forward than the Hackitt review recommendations on the key issue of

combustibility. In a letter to the Chair of the Select Committee, Dame Judith explains that there are two ways to work with the current guidance: either using products of limited combustibility in cladding systems or undergoing a full system test. She says her clear view is that the former

“is undoubtedly the lower risk option.”

It is therefore surprising she is not recommending that approach. However, I welcome the Secretary of State’s consultation. The issue with large-scale tests is that they do not reflect real world conditions, so we will need to consider that in the consultation. Can he confirm that the consultation will consider external cladding and insulation in terms of limited combustibility or non-combustibility?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes some powerful and important points about the nature of a system, the external cladding, how that fits within certain other structures and systems and what that actually means. That is why it is right that we look at the consultation in that way. He points to important recommendations that Dame Judith makes. Equally, she has made clear statements about what system products can and cannot be used for, how they should be developed and their use made essential. When we look at the report, both in terms of its specificity and broad nature, it points to significant change. As he rightly says, I want to consult on combustibility and get on with this.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Fire safety regulations were wrongly covered by the one in, two out statement of new regulation. Will the Secretary of State commit today to excluding fire safety regulations from the statement’s successor, the business impact target, which is currently being devised for this Parliament?

James Brokenshire: What I would say directly to the hon. Lady is that we need to get this right. We have had a comprehensive set of recommendations from Dame Judith, which will require legislation. We are determined to look at that carefully to ensure that we are able to consult and get the right legislation before the House. That is my driving priority.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I welcome the fact that the Government have committed to covering the costs of replacing cladding on local authority and housing association properties. Has that offer been formally articulated? I also agree with my right hon. Friend’s comments on private developers. As far as I am concerned, they need to stand up, show responsibility and get on with it.

James Brokenshire: I wholly endorse what my hon. Friend has said in relation to the private sector. On the public sector, as I indicated in an earlier response, we are formulating our detailed guidance and information to go to local authorities but my intent is to see that that money is deployed as quickly as possible.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I welcome Dame Judith’s recommendations. Does the Secretary of State now recognise the need for clarity across the building industry? When will new standards be in place?

James Brokenshire: We have talked about Approved Document B and other planning guidance. I want that to be out before the summer. We have had some consultation, but we need to make progress. I think that underlines my clear, driving desire to get on with things where we can but, obviously, where longer-term reform is necessary, to consider carefully to get it right.

Pharmaceutical Sector

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Select Committee statement. The Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), will speak on her subject for up to 10 minutes, during which—the House is reminded—no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call right hon. or hon. Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and the hon. Lady to respond to those in turn. I call the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, Rachel Reeves.

1 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving time for this statement. This is the fifth and final report in a series of inquiries that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee has held on the impact of Brexit on key sectors of our economy, covering the civil nuclear sector, automotives, aerospace, and food and drink, and today, we publish our report on the impact of Brexit on the pharmaceutical sector. Our Committee has made a number of recommendations to the Government on how to get the best deal for the UK as we leave the European Union. We have received over 100 pieces of written evidence, including more than 20 specifically on pharmaceuticals, including from AstraZeneca, Merck, Johnson & Johnson and the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry.

As Members know, the UK pharmaceutical sector is among the most productive and innovative industries in the United Kingdom, employing over 110,000 people, and it is part of a global industry in which the UK is a world leader, but Brexit puts that at risk. Pharmaceuticals contribute around 10% of our goods exports, worth almost £25 billion a year, and we import almost as much, with as much as 73% of our imports coming from the European Union.

A number of issues were raised when we took evidence, but the first issue that businesses and trade bodies raised with us were the barriers to trade after we leave the European Union, particularly around customs checks and tariffs. Specifically for pharmaceuticals, delays at borders risk time and temperature-sensitive products expiring, becoming useless to patients and therefore putting lives at risk, while new rules and paperwork mean extra costs to each shipment of medicine or ingredients. The Government must do everything they can to avoid these outcomes for patients.

For pharmaceutical products, many medicines and ingredients are tariff-free under World Trade Organisation rules. That is welcome, but the list of tariff-free medicines is not regularly updated with new medicines. The failure to reach agreements in multinational trade negotiations is stark. It has been over eight years since a deal on adding new products has been reached, meaning tariffs will apply for recent and new medicines, jeopardising cheap access to them.

The industry confirmed to us that trading on WTO terms would mean an increase in the cost of medicines. Merck estimated additional costs to its business alone of £1.6 million a year for import tariffs. The Office of Health Economics estimated a typical pharmaceutical company could expect costs of more than £23 million a year in supply chain, tariff and non-tariff costs and fees. We can expect those costs to be passed on to consumers either in pharmacies or to the national health service, the biggest buyer of pharmaceuticals in our country.

A relationship that is as close as possible, with as close to frictionless trade as possible, would therefore benefit both our country and the rest of the European Union, but the United Kingdom has the most to lose if we do not get a deal. The UK represents only 2.3% of the global pharmaceuticals market, compared with more than 22% for the rest of the EU. It is purely a bigger market than the UK alone.

Beyond the issue of customs and tariffs, there is a further, but related, issue about the regulatory regime that underpins the trade and recognition of products across the European Union. Pharmaceuticals is rightly a highly regulated industry—it has to be—but the prospect of divergence is of key concern to industry. The Confederation of British Industry estimates that each new product—as many as 100 a year—would cost £50,000 each for marketing authorisation in the United Kingdom. We agree with industry that regulatory alignment must ensure that companies do not need to build new facilities, duplicate testing regimes or recruit vast numbers of qualified staff, of which there is already a desperate shortage.

Johnson & Johnson estimated that if there is no mutual recognition of batch testing between the UK and the EU, it would lead to an additional 50,000 tests a year just for Johnson & Johnson, with a cost of almost £1 million a year. Successful British companies such as GlaxoSmithKline have confirmed that they are already spending tens of millions of pounds on setting up sites in the EU to ensure that they can still release products there, in the event of divergence or a lack of recognition of standards.

Without certainty on the future regulatory relationships, companies will either have to invest further in contingency planning or risk losing access to key markets. However, the majority of pharmaceutical companies are not big multinationals, but small and micro-businesses that are unable to afford these contingency measures. A huge and important market is at risk of being closed off to them. We cannot allow that to happen.

The Prime Minister has indicated that the Government recognise the benefit of association with the European Medicines Agency—the regulatory body—but that is not enough. Brexit is already seeing investment flow out of the UK, without a guarantee that it will come back even if a deal is reached. The Government need to provide urgent certainty, otherwise businesses will have no choice but to focus on the rest of Europe, and again, this is something we must avoid.

The EMA, the regulatory body that oversees the rules governing what pharmaceuticals can be sold in the EU, has of course been based here in the UK since 1995. It is currently in Canary Wharf, but as right hon. and hon. Members know, last autumn, the EU announced that the EMA would move to Amsterdam. As a consequence,

more than 1,000 jobs and a prestigious body will be leaving the UK and going overseas. The UK has been an influential part of the EMA since its creation, with the UK's Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency being responsible for a disproportionate share of the work on the authorisation of new medicines for use in the EU.

For the EU, the loss of our expertise will put pressure on regulators in the remaining states. For the UK, there is a risk that the MHRA will not have the capacity to work alone, even just for the UK market. It is not too late to save some of these jobs and this expertise for our country, and avoid the duplication of work. Given the mutual benefits of the UK working with the EMA, and the challenges for the organisation in relocating from London to its new home in Amsterdam, our Committee has recommended that the Government seek a continued presence for some EMA staff and facilities in the UK, as well as a continued relationship after we leave. It is in the best interests of patients and consumers across Europe, including in the UK, to do so.

Our Committee heard that any regulatory divergence, and any tariffs or barriers at the border, will see the cost of medicines go up. The American Pharmaceutical Group told us that it "firmly believes" that a no-deal scenario will

"threaten...the position of the NHS as a world-leading health service",

because it will struggle to access drugs as quickly and cheaply as it does today. For the vast majority of medicines that are supplied to the NHS, the cost will either be borne by the taxpayer or trigger a reduction in the range of medicines available to patients. The Government must secure a deal that does not see that happen.

I give credit to the Government: they have set out a pragmatic approach. We welcome the positive words from the Prime Minister, as well as from the Business Secretary and the Health Secretary in their article in the *Financial Times* last year. However, as with all the sectors of our economy, the Government now need to turn those words into deeds to secure the best possible deal for the United Kingdom in the interests of business and primarily, of patients.

Throughout our inquiries into sectors, we have sought to find benefits and opportunities from Brexit for those industries, but we have heard no evidence of any real opportunities for any of the sectors we have considered. In already globalised parts of our economy, large untapped markets yearning for British goods are a fantasy. In the responses that we have received so far to our reports on aerospace and automobiles, the Government did not dispute our conclusion on the lack of opportunity or the need for close alignment.

For the sectors we considered, we have found specific challenges and risks that Brexit will incur. For civil nuclear, leaving Euratom means leaving an effective nuclear safeguards regime and going it alone. For automobiles, "just in time" manufacturing processes are threatened by increased costs and delays at the borders. For aerospace, divergence from European standards would risk our chance of accessing the substantial growth that that sector is experiencing. For processed food and drink, there is a risk that border delays will make products unusable, and costly border delays may cause food prices to rise.

I hope that I have shown the impact of Brexit on pharmaceuticals: customs delays, potential new tariffs, and, in particular, the risks of regulatory barriers to trade. Perhaps there are benefits from leaving the European Union, but we have seen no evidence of what they may be, at least in the sectors that we have considered.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): GSK is based in west London, and I am well aware of the damage that Brexit will do to the pharmaceutical industry. During her investigations, did my hon. Friend see any advantages at all—any indication that, as the Brexiteers maintain, markets will suddenly open up to the industry if we do leave the EU?

Rachel Reeves: We already export to countries outside the European Union. We are a success in that sector. We took huge amounts of evidence in the UK and in Brussels from small and big businesses, and not a single one pointed to any benefits of leaving the EU, or any opportunities we could seize that we do not have today.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The report says that regulatory divergence will cost jobs and investment, and will make certain medicines more difficult to obtain in this country. Is that correct?

Rachel Reeves: I can say to my hon. Friend—who sat in on the evidence sessions with me—that there are a number of issues, which I hope I put across in my statement. Some medicines lose their benefit quickly, and if there are big delays at the border, they will not have the effect that they would have had if they had reached patients quickly. That is one risk. Another is tariffs, which could also be a huge issue. Although WTO rules specify that medicines are tariff-free, they have not been updated for eight years, so many medicines are not included. Currently, medicines that are tested in any country in the European Union can then be accessed in the UK, but that may not be the case after we leave the European Union. For those three reasons, I think that there is a risk to patients from a hard Brexit, at least, or from a no-deal scenario.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): A few months ago, GSK's chairman told me that the one-off cost of preparation for Brexit would be £70 million and the ongoing costs would be £50 million a year. Today the GSK plant in Barnard Castle is announcing a restructuring programme to cut costs, which will mean the loss of dozens of jobs. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is far more important to have regulatory alignment in the interests of jobs in modern manufacturing than to maintain the Prime Minister's doomed attempt at unity with extreme hard-right Brexiteers?

Rachel Reeves: I can sense my hon. Friend's frustration that jobs will be lost in her constituency because of the risks of Brexit. GSK has made it very clear that Brexit will cost it a lot of money. If it is testing its drugs in the UK, it may no longer have access to European markets, because those drugs will not be recognised unless they are tested in mainland Europe. That is creating new costs, as GSK is having to set up new testing facilities in the rest of Europe. If there are cost increases, it will seek to cut costs elsewhere, and the consequences of that will be borne by my hon. Friend's constituents in Bishop

[*Rachel Reeves*]

Auckland and also by patients in the UK as a whole who may not have access to the drugs. As far as I can see, leaving the European Union will have no benefits for the pharmaceutical sector, or—but most important—for patients.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I commend the hon. Lady and her Committee for this excellent report. As she will know, I have spoken about the threat to Techno Pharma, in my constituency, and to patient safety. Does she agree that it is vital for us to have clarity on the future of medical regulation and what the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency will look like after the UK leaves the EU? That is being lost amid the noise of Brexit, but will it not be a huge issue as we go through this process?

Rachel Reeves: The hon. Lady has made an important point about clarity, which I do not think I put across sufficiently in my statement. The industry representatives who gave evidence to our Committee said that they would need two to five years to prepare for any changes in the regime and the trading arrangements with the rest of the European Union, and of course we do not have those two to five years: we have just over a year and a half until the end of the transition period. That is of great concern to the hon. Lady's constituents, and to patients and businesses across the UK.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Both the EU and the pharmaceutical industry contribute significant sums to medical research and development in the UK. I am thinking particularly of Cardiff University's School of Biosciences, which does fantastic cancer research, and also—in my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV & AIDS—of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative facility, which has fantastic EU funding for its search for an HIV vaccine. Is my hon. Friend worried about the impact on facilities such as those?

Rachel Reeves: I am worried about those issues. My hon. Friend knows full well that we have benefited disproportionately from Horizon 2020: 13% of the funds have come to this country, reflecting our fantastic research base in Cardiff, in Leeds and across the UK. It is welcome that the Government have guaranteed those funds until 2020, but there have been no guarantees beyond that. As my hon. Friend knows, research does

not work on two or three-year horizons; it works on 10 or 20-year horizons. We need clarity, and the certainty that we will receive that investment in key research on matters such as the HIV vaccine that my hon. Friend mentioned.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The Government speak of a pragmatic approach. Do we not have a parallel interest in the European Medicines Agency, and would it not be sensible to retain some role for the UK within it?

Rachel Reeves: The idea that leaving the European Union is about cutting red tape is absolutely ridiculous. In fact, red tape protects us, and in pharmaceuticals that is absolutely crucial. As for the EMA and the MHRA, we will be replicating something that worked incredibly well. Why create a load of new regulators when we had a set of regulators based here in the UK doing a fantastic job? No one doubts that the EMA was doing a good job, so why replicate it now? It makes no sense.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I am sure many Members will concur that British businesses, including those in the pharma sector, desperately need some certainty. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should stop fighting themselves, and should start to make decisions that are in the best interests of the UK?

Rachel Reeves: I absolutely agree. The Government need to get on with negotiating with the European Union, rather than negotiating with their Back Benchers and even within the Cabinet. We need certainty. We need certainty on our access to the single market, we need certainty on our membership of the customs union, and we need certainty on the regulatory framework that will apply after we leave the European Union. Without that, it is incredibly difficult for businesses to plan for the future, to secure the jobs and investment that we need in this country, and, in the case of medicines and pharmaceuticals, to ensure that patients have access—timely access—to the best drugs, and new drugs.

Mr Speaker: In a moment, I shall call the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Gentleman has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

Private Members' Bills: Money Resolutions

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

1.19 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I seek leave to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the expectation that the Government table a money resolution to a private Member's Bill that has received a Second Reading. Private Members' Bills represent one of the few legislative powers that are open to Back Benchers, but the Government are making a mockery of the private Member's Bill process. Refusing to bring forward a money resolution for my Bill amounts to an abuse of Parliament, and Members should urgently have the chance to debate it.

My private Member's Bill passed its Second Reading unanimously. Through points of order, business questions and an urgent question last week, Members have made it clear that they wish the Bill to be debated and scrutinised in Committee. The Government's actions are profoundly undemocratic. This is a minority Government who nevertheless seem willing to defy the will of the House.

The Government are running roughshod over parliamentary procedure. Money resolutions have historically been formalities, introduced as a matter of course after Second Reading. Indeed, in multiple representations to the Procedure Committee, the Government committed to this approach. Five months on from the Second Reading of my Bill, no resolution is in sight, however. Statements from Ministers suggest that one may never materialise. The Government have leapfrogged two Bills that were behind mine over it, and those have now been given money resolutions. The only logic here is that this is about what is in the Government's interests.

My Bill on constituency boundaries gets to the heart of the balance between Back Benchers and the Executive. Cutting the number of MPs without reducing the number of Ministers will increase the proportion of MPs on the payroll, making it more difficult for Back Benchers to challenge the Government.

I believe that the original decision to reduce the number of MPs was politically motivated. The Conservative party stands to win a greater proportion of the seats in a smaller Parliament. By refusing to allow my private Member's Bill to progress, the Government are abusing their executive power for their own party's electoral gain. Ministers all but confessed to this when they said they would wait until the Boundary Commission had reported before making a decision about my Bill.

The Government are defying the will of the House and overstretching their executive power in the service of their party's electoral interests. Members deserve a chance to debate this issue and restore some integrity to the private Member's Bill process.

Mr Speaker: I have listened carefully to the hon. Member's application, and I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the hon. Member the leave of the House?

Application agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member has obtained the leave of the House. *[Interruption.]* Members are most welcome to resume their seats if they so wish. *[Interruption.]* Order. Members attending to our proceedings will want to know what follows. I can advise the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and the House that the debate will be held on Monday as the first item of public business. The debate will last for up to three hours and it will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the hon. Gentleman's application.

Backbench Business

Plastic Bottles and Coffee Cups

1.23 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the First and Second Reports of the Environmental Audit Committee, *Plastic Bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide*, HC 339, and *Disposable Packaging: Coffee Cups*, HC 657; and urges the Government to accept their recommendations as part of its Resources and Waste Strategy.

I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, the Liaison Committee and the Backbench Business Committee for granting time in the House to debate the Environmental Audit Committee reports. I thank my Committee colleagues, too, some of whom are present, for their work on our inquiry last year.

Today, I want to talk about the scale of the plastic pandemic, the solutions we proposed, the importance of the EU circular economy package and how we make producers responsible for their packaging. May I begin, however, by welcoming the announcement on Tuesday that Parliament will phase out most single-use plastics on our estate and introduce a 25p “latte levy”? I thank you, Mr Speaker, and the Chair of the Administration Committee for your support in making this happen. *[Interruption.]* Creagh’s law; very good.

We are in the middle of a global pandemic. Plastic is everywhere, from the top of Mount Everest to the depths of the ocean to the north pole. Plastic has been found in every species of animal in the Arctic, from plankton to polar bears. Research by Dr Erik van Sebille at Imperial College London shows that most of the UK’s marine plastic pollution ends up in the Arctic, so the UK has a particular responsibility to clean up our act and protect the Arctic.

In 2015, the UK signed up to the United Nations global goals for sustainable development, including goal 12, “sustainable consumption and production” and goal 14 on protecting our oceans. The UK led in the development of those goals, but unfortunately the Government sometimes seem to think they are something for other countries, not the UK.

Our planet has only one ocean, wrapped around it like a cloak, and plastic bottles make up one third of all plastic pollution in the sea. They break down into micro-plastics, which harm marine wildlife that eat them. After my Committee’s ground-breaking work on rinse-off microbeads, which led the Government to ban their manufacture and sale, we examined single-use plastics, focusing on plastic bottles and coffee cups.

Single-use plastics take five seconds to make, five minutes to use and 500 years to biodegrade, so when we throw them away there is no such place as “away.”

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. Has she or her Committee come to a conclusion as why the Government are seemingly so resistant to oxo-biodegradable plastic technology, which was invented by Professor Scott at Aston University in the 1970s? Does she agree that the Government have no strategy to deal with plastic which escapes into the environment already?

Mary Creagh: I have seen evidence on oxo-biodegradable and I know there are a couple of possible additives to plastics. The research on how and how fast it breaks down is not conclusive. I know it can break down in proper professional composting machines, but the evidence on what happens out in the ocean is not that clear and we do not want an end-of-pipe solution to this problem; we want something at the beginning that is sustainable.

There is a live argument on this and it is going on at EU level between the plant-based plastics manufacturers of the south and those such as us in the north who have a more petrochemical-based approach. I am not a scientist, but I know the jury is out and that scientists have looked at this. It is important that we develop the correct policy and do not just look at what happens at the end of the pipe.

In the UK, we recycle just 57% of our plastic bottles overall; the figure for water bottles is higher. We estimate that 700,000 plastic bottles are littered every day. That litter spoils our streets, threatens our wildlife and ruins our beaches. We are paying for this clean-up through our council tax. Keep Britain Tidy estimates that English councils spend £1 billion a year cleaning up after fly-tippers and litterbugs. We recommended introducing a deposit return scheme to boost recycling rates and create a clear stream of recycled plastic for manufacturers. When the Environment Secretary gave evidence to my Committee in April, he told us that we would not see that product return scheme until 2020, but better late than never and we welcome his commitment. We must also create a market for that recovered plastic, which is why we recommended that Ministers set a target for 50% of recycled plastic to be present in new bottles. I am pleased that Coca-Cola has committed to do that.

We use 2.5 billion coffee cups a year, enough to stretch around the planet five and a half times. Before our inquiry, I—along with most other people—thought that coffee cups were recycled, but they are not. Their plastic coating, which is thinner than a human hair, means that most of them end up landfilled or incinerated. The coffee shop industry has told us that disposable coffee cups are recyclable, but “recyclable” does not mean “recycled”. Paper mills do not want them, and plastics reproducers do not want them. Just one in every 400 is recycled, which is just 0.25%. There are just three recycling plants in England that can recycle them. Moreover, if someone puts their coffee cup in a recycling bin, in a coffee shop or on the go, it will not be recycled and it could contaminate the other papers and plastics in the bin.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech, with which I wholly agree. It seems to me that the principle that the polluter should pay is an important one, and that there should be incentives for individuals to do some of the tidying up as well. I remember as a child scuttling around on Saturdays collecting bottles and returning them to the local shop or off-licence to get the returned deposit. Those sorts of deposit scheme help to incentivise human behaviour. Does she agree with the “polluter pays” principle and that incentives are important?

Mary Creagh: I emphatically agree. I remember the happy days of collecting those bottles. In doing that, we can create an army of litter pickers out in the streets.

I was out in Norway with NATO last week, visiting the Arctic, and there is a full deposit return scheme there. One of the people we talked to told us that his son had made £580 in the holidays last summer by going on a little mission out on the streets every day. I also noticed, when I was at the airport disposing of my single-use plastic bottle in the throwaway scheme, that the deposit would be collected by the Red Cross in Norway. There is an opportunity here for charities to partner alongside the deposit return scheme and to find a valuable new income stream.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I am going slightly off the point here, but the hon. Lady mentioned airports. Does she agree that one thing that is little understood is that people are allowed to take their refillable containers to the airport? There are often places to refill them there, but people do not seem to be aware of that fact.

Mary Creagh: I agree with the hon. Lady. I know that Heathrow has introduced refill stations just the other side of the security gates, but the problem is that people are usually already in the queue for security before they remember that they have a full bottle of water. Most people cannot drink half a litre of water straight off. Airports could look at how to dispose of those liquids while encouraging people to keep the bottles. That would result in more reuse. That is a challenge for the airports and the transport industry to think about today.

Reducing and reusing are always better than recycling, and the 5p plastic bag charge reduced plastic bag sales by 83% in the first year, so we know that charges change consumer behaviour. My Committee recommended a 25p latte levy on disposable coffee cups to encourage people to bring their own cups. We want that levy to fund new “binrastructure”. That is terrible; I am trying not to murder the English language, but I think I have just stuck a nail in there. The Chancellor is consulting on a single-use plastics tax, and I look forward to reading the responses. The consultation closes tomorrow.

Industry is stepping up to this; it knows that it cannot go on with business as usual. Costa has introduced a recycling scheme that aims to recycle half a billion cups by 2020. Unfortunately, only 14 million cups were recycled last year, but that was a good start. Starbucks is trialling a 5p latte levy in 35 central London cafés, and reusable cup usage has more than doubled in the first six weeks, which is very encouraging. The truth is, however, that we need both. We need the latte levy and we need recycling schemes if we are to tackle this problem.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. I am also a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, and she is a wonderful campaigning Chair. It is a great honour to serve with her.

The hon. Lady is talking about recycling, and I was recently at a circular economy discussion at which WasteAid said that 2 billion people lived without waste collection and that 3 billion lived without proper waste recycling or reuse. One of the big things we discussed was the use of plastic bottles in the developing world where glass bottles used to be used. Does she think it would be better if glass bottles were used in the developing world?

Mary Creagh: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution to the Committee, of which he is a fantastic, excellent and constructive member. He provides challenge as well as co-operation, which is how we get to a good place and find cross-party agreement.

I remember visiting Juba in South Sudan in 2012 and noticing that there was very little water there for people, and that all the aid workers and visitors were using plastic bottles. There was no waste infrastructure whatever. This is a really important problem, because we know that huge amounts of waste are thrown into rivers in Africa, India and the far east. We need to get that waste out of the rivers. How do we do that? We pay people to do it. It is not just kids in the UK who will collect 5p or 10p plastic bottles; people will do the right thing, but they need a cash incentive to do it. The United Nations has an opportunity to achieve that through the international climate fund. We all tend to think about that in relation to green energy and clean energy, but we need to look at how some of these climate funds are allocated and spent at supranational level, and at how our own UK aid budget could be used to help to set up systems to keep plastic out of the oceans. As I said earlier, there is only one ocean and we need to do more to protect it.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I recently went to Bangladesh, and along the whole beach the plastic litter was waist-high. The amount was huge. I have spoken to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development about this. Does the hon. Lady agree that it would be a good idea to spend some of our aid money on paying people to clear up the mess? It is, after all, going into the same ocean that we use and that everyone else uses. That would help people to clean up their environment, which would also help their tourism, because people will go to a clean beach but not a filthy beach.

Mary Creagh: I agree with the hon. Lady. She makes an excellent point. Bangladesh is absolutely at the forefront of climate change, and much of our aid budget is going there to make homes more resilient, but resilience in communities is also about giving people a good, clean, safe environment to live in and ensuring that the poor have decent incomes.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all the work she does on environmental issues, both here at home and internationally. This is not just about beaches in Bangladesh. We have seen footage of beaches in Brighton, for example, being polluted by bottles. Does she agree that local authorities need more support? There is some excellent practice, but it is patchy. Perhaps the Government could consider introducing citizens grant schemes to encourage people to take part actively around the country and to work with local authorities and corporates to clean up our beaches as well as our streets.

Mary Creagh: I thank my hon. Friend for her suggestion. We actually made that point in our report on marine protected areas and said that there should be a coastal communities fund to help to develop tourism and to enable communities to take ownership of the amazing nature that surrounds them. We do not have tropical rainforests in the UK, but we do have some of the world's best breeding sites for birds and all sorts of Ramsar wetland sites. Bringing communities closer to

[*Mary Creagh*]

nature where they live can only be a good thing. I also want to pay tribute to Sky Ocean Rescue for its work in bringing to a wider audience the good activities that are going on not only globally but locally, including those literally outside our own door to clean up the Thames.

We want the Government to send a clear message to industry that all single-use coffee cups should be recycled by 2023, and that if that does not happen, they should simply be banned and we should move to a system of reusable cups only. Consumers want to do the right thing, and they deserve to know that companies are doing it too.

We have also looked at the UK's packaging system, which we think needs a fundamental redesign. Producers of packaging should ensure that their waste is dealt with according to the waste hierarchy: reduce, reuse, recycle. How do we make that happen? At the moment, businesses that produce or use packaging have to show that they have recycled it by purchasing a packaging recovery note—a PRN—from an accredited recycler or exporter. We have heard evidence, however, that that system is a blunt instrument that does not reward design for recyclability and that does not penalise the production of packaging that is difficult and costly to recycle. We therefore recommend that the Government should reform the PRN system. They should introduce a fee structure that reduces the cost of sustainable coffee cups and raises the cost of cups that are hard to recycle.

The landfill tax and the PRN system have been the twin pillars of UK recycling for the past 20 years. Most of our waste went to landfill 20 years ago, but we now recycle almost half of it. However, recycling rates are stalling, and recycling needs a shot in the arm to bring it back to life.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is a wonderful advocate for recycling. Does she accept—if she does not, she should have a look at the parliamentary questions that I have asked—that the biggest problem is that recycling is flatlining because waste is being incinerated? That must be dangerous at a time of air pollution.

Mary Creagh: Well, most of the waste that we recycle is actually exported, and the recent China waste ban brought that home to people who thought that everything was somehow recycled in the UK. The situation was certainly brought home to the Members who visited Bywaters, the House's recycling company, and heard about the difficulties it was experiencing—although some of those difficulties have been alleviated. However, my hon. Friend's question was about incineration. I have visited an incinerator, and it is obviously better to get the calorific heat value from waste instead of landfilling it, because we will have to dig it up in 10 or 20 years' time and incinerate it anyway, such is the pressure on land use in this country. However, we must ensure that the waste hierarchy is respected, because that is where problems arise. People tell me that they are reopening landfill sites and sending more waste for incineration.

Going back to the PRN system, the Committee could not see where the £100 million a year that the system raises actually goes, so we have asked the National Audit Office to examine the system to follow the money and tell us where it goes.

Turning to the EU circular economy package, it provides for a much more stringent extended producer responsibility scheme. At the moment, the UK has just three schemes, covering electrical goods and cars, whereas France has 14 schemes, covering furniture, tyres, mattresses and infectious healthcare waste. A mattress recycling scheme would create jobs in the heavy woollen industry in Wakefield, Ossett and Dewsbury. We need producers to be accountable for their products beyond the factory gates. Cigarette butts and chewing gum are the most frequently littered items in the country, so why are tobacco companies and sweet manufacturers not paying for the cost of their clean-up? Because it has always been that way. We need to work out how the “polluter pays” principle applies to cigarette merchants and to the chewing gum brigade. Such a move could save cash-strapped councils millions, and the money would go directly to them because they clear up the litter and do the gum-busting. Perhaps they could present the gum manufacturers with the goo that they steam-clean off the streets.

The Environment Secretary told us that he will commit to the EU's proposed target to recycle 65% of household waste by 2035, but what will happen to that target after Brexit? Who will enforce it? The new environmental oversight body will be able to issue advisory notices, but not fines. It will not be able to take legal action, and it will not be ready for March 2019. Brexit will weaken our waste system. There was an interesting debate in the other place yesterday about whether people would still be able to bring cases to the European Court of Justice during the transitional period, and the Lords Minister was not entirely clear about whether that could happen. We will be watching developments very carefully.

We have achieved a great deal. We have got the Government working with Water UK to roll out a network of water refill points, and supermarkets such as Tesco, Sainsbury's, Morrisons, Aldi, Lidl and Waitrose are launching a voluntary pledge to cut plastic packaging. The Treasury's consultation on a single-use tax closes tomorrow, Departments have agreed to end the sale of single-use plastics, and Parliament is going to lead the way as well. A lot has been done, but there is a lot still to do.

We must prevent waste from entering our environment, and that will bring social, economic and environmental benefits. People are happier if the streets and parks are litter-free, our economy works better if we make smart use of limited resources, and our wildlife is protected if we keep plastic out of the sea. When people win, the economy wins and the environment wins. I look forward to a good debate and to hearing about the exciting work that colleagues have been doing in their local areas.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Several colleagues want to speak this afternoon, but the time is limited. I hope that we can manage without a formal time limit, because then the debate flows much better, but that means that I have to trust colleagues to take other people's points of view and right to speak into consideration. I am sure that everybody here this afternoon is an honourable Member and will do so. If speeches last around seven or eight minutes, everyone who wishes to speak will have a chance to do so.

If people speak for much longer than that, I will have to impose a time limit. I am sure that I can trust Justine Greening to begin properly.

1.45 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an honour to contribute to this afternoon's debate, because its subject matters hugely to my constituents, who have the River Thames running through their community. I echo the points made by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) and pay tribute to the work of her Environmental Audit Committee, which has led the way in this discussion over recent years. As she says, we have come a long way.

I remember writing to all the major coffee houses in Southfields just two years ago to ask them to trial a latte levy locally, which I felt the community would have welcomed, but none of them was interested. I remember writing to every single major supermarket in Southfields to ask whether they would trial reducing plastic packaging and allowing people to bring their own containers into the stores instead of having to purchase food and groceries in unnecessary packaging. Again, I was met with stony silence. However, the tide is turning in favour of all such companies stepping up to the plate and starting to innovate.

As a local MP, I launched the Putney plastic pledge initiative, which is about the community coming together to see what we can do to reduce our plastic usage. We have had a fantastic response from shops and businesses, and the Putney business improvement district has been involved. Waitrose has also taken part in the pledge, and I thank it for its efforts. Other parts of the community have been involved, including the local pubs. Young's brewery is a fantastic local business that runs many of our pubs, and on boat race day it took the step of switching away from disposable plastic glasses for the first time. The reusable plastic glasses can be used not just in Putney on boat race day, but down in Wimbledon for the tennis tournament. The individual actions that businesses are taking will make a big difference over time.

The Putney plastic pledge has gone well beyond that, however, and the University of Roehampton is now considering what it can do to cut down its plastic usage. It has a fantastic record on sustainability, and the students are showing some leadership—I regularly try to get a wonderful latte at the Growhampton café. I also pay tribute to our local schools. At the end of last year, children from the Hotham Primary School council asked me what we are doing about plastics after having seen "Blue Planet II", and that inspired me to think about what I could do to pull the community together to do more. Schools are now setting about cutting back on their plastic usage. Southmead Primary School has designed a logo for the pledge, and I will be visiting Riversdale Primary School in Southfields tomorrow to see some of the work that it has been doing.

So many of our actions look to the future and aim to protect the environment in which we want the next generation to become adults. Such issues have really captured their imagination and, as much as anything else, showing that this Parliament and Government are responding to their priorities is one of the most important aspects of this whole effort.

As I said at the beginning, this issue particularly matters to my local community. There is sometimes a sense that people who live in the city are somehow less interested in the environment, but nothing could be further from the truth. We really value our environment in my local community, because we know we need to take care of it. We have the River Thames right on our doorstep, and we have the wonderful Wandsworth Park just next door and then Richmond Park. I go running every week on Wimbledon Common. Protecting our environment is hugely important to us, which is why we had a clean-up on the day after the boat race—the hon. Member for Wakefield talked about how much of a problem we have with plastics in our oceans and rivers. Many of the items we cleaned up were cotton buds and plastic bags—the sorts of things that were never going to degrade, so it needed a human to pick them up and take them away, which is what we did.

We have a long way to go on this, and I thoroughly support the hon. Lady's challenge to business. Business can really be the innovator in helping all of us be able to cut down, and I would like businesses, particularly supermarkets, to allow consumers more choice so they can more actively choose whether they want packaging by allowing them to take in their own containers. There has to be a way around some of the health and safety laws that seem to get in the way of that being possible.

We must continue to learn from behavioural change. I have to admit that I was delighted when we introduced the 5p levy on plastic bags, but I have quite a lot of bags for life in my kitchen—probably more than I will need over the course of my life. We need to recognise that we are all on a journey in changing our behaviour, and research could inform the next step after the plastic bag levy to cut down on people like me having far too many bags for life.

My community really cares about the environment. The issue of plastics has been a galvaniser for Government and is one of the things we care about in our environment in Putney. Issues such as air pollution and noise pollution, and the impact they have on public health, matter to us just as much. If the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs could apply his almost religious zeal on plastics to noise pollution and air pollution, we would be even more delighted with the progress that is being made.

1.52 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) not only on securing this debate but on her excellent leadership of the Environmental Audit Committee, of which I am proud to be a member.

It is clear that the public want us to act. The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) made a very good speech. She spoke about her local schools and how enthused schoolchildren are about this issue. Just this week I received some brilliant letters from year 4 pupils at Wicklea Academy in my constituency. They demonstrated not only a real understanding of the issue but clear-eyed astonishment that, say, black plastic containers could be used for ready meals when we know they are not recycled. They asked me how that could possibly be justified.

[Kerry McCarthy]

Huge credit must go to “Blue Planet II” for raising awareness and creating momentum behind the campaign. Whenever I mention things like “Blue Planet II” I have to mention the BBC natural history unit, which is of course based in Bristol—the people of Bristol deserve some credit. “Blue Planet II” brought into our homes, in amazing, vivid detail, how wonderful and extraordinary the habitats and wildlife of our seas and oceans are, and just how precious a natural environment it is, which made it all the more distressing when we saw the episode with sea life being cut open and plastic being pulled from the sea life’s stomachs. We saw the terrible damage that plastic pollution can do.

The Government have made the right noises so far, but action has been limited and slightly disappointing. They have promised a deposit return scheme, which is one of the report’s key recommendations. The scheme will be excellent but, in other respects, the action has been limited to low-hanging fruit such as the ban on the wash-off version of microbeads in cosmetic products.

The Government have talked about ending the sale of plastic straws, stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds. Again I credit a Bristol organisation, City to Sea, which has been campaigning, particularly on cotton buds, for a few years and has approached all the major retailers and manufacturers, many of which have managed to change their products. In many cases, instead of using plastic, they now use compacted cardboard or something else that is far more environmentally friendly.

The Treasury announced in November, and re-announced this spring, a call for evidence on changes to the tax system to reduce single-use plastics, which, as we have heard, worked incredibly well with plastic bags. I would be interested to hear what products will be banned and what products will be subject to a surcharge. There is a fine line between discouraging use—reducing use to a much lower level but still allowing some use—and banning the products altogether.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who I am generally happy to support and congratulate on the progress he has made on environmental issues, speaks of making the UK a world leader in resource efficiency, but his Department has a marked lack of enthusiasm for the EU circular economy package, which could be transformative not just in how we deal with waste and resources but in the number of new jobs we create in this innovative sector. Most of the really big decisions seem to have been deferred to the already much-delayed waste and resources strategy.

There are three players when it comes to trying to achieve such systemic change: consumers and the choices they make, which is important; the market and its response to consumer demand or to business opportunities, and we are seeing that happen to an extent; and the state, with its ability to regulate, ban, use fiscal incentives or disincentives, set targets and drive forward change. The Government have something of an ideologically driven weakness for the hands-off, voluntary approach—maybe a bit of education, a bit of a nudge, but basically preferring to leave it to consumers and the market, except for the low-hanging fruit I mentioned.

This issue is simply too important and too urgent for such an approach. We are destroying our precious planet, and the Government need to show significantly more

leadership than they have shown so far. For example, their response to our report on coffee cups is quite discouraging. They rejected our recommendation of a 25p latte levy, which we have already heard about, and most of the rest was kicked into the long grass where the waste strategy currently resides. I am glad that the parliamentary authorities have this week shown more ambition with their plastic-free Parliament package, which includes a latte levy. I particularly thank Surfers Against Sewage for its work on plastics; it has been brilliant.

In their response to the EAC report, the Government praised the paper cup alliance, which is really a rather weak collaboration of big coffee chains and manufacturers. Like the right hon. Member for Putney, I have written to the coffee chains. I will not name and shame here, but it was interesting to see which companies responded in a reasonably positive way and which were very dismissive. The paper cup alliance has not even set a target for increasing the proportion of coffee cups that are recycled, and its primary intention seems to be to rebrand “coffee cups” as “paper cups” and to get better recognition of them as recyclable, but we have already heard that, although notionally they are recyclable, only five facilities in the whole UK can separate the thin plastic membrane from the paper outer. There is no point going around telling people that coffee cups can be recycled when, in practice, they cannot. As we have heard, all but 0.25% of coffee cups go to landfill or are incinerated.

There clearly need to be measures to develop alternatives to the current cups, such as Frugapac—there are a number of alternatives on the market. This shows the limits of voluntary action. The RSPB’s excellent 2015 report, “Using regulation as a last resort?” analysed more than 150 voluntary schemes across a range of sectors and found that common to the majority of them were unambitious targets, a lack of transparency, no enforcement mechanism, and an inability to attract widespread industry participation and compliance. That is what happens when we leave it to the market.

Only recently, the Waste and Resources Action Programme, which the Government have charged with delivering on this agenda, has had to make a tenth of its staff redundant because of funding cuts. We need a level playing field, and we need the Government to regulate and pass laws so there is one. Without that, the best practice businesses, such as Boston Tea Party, a small chain of cafés that sells takeaway coffees in Bristol and has announced that it is banning all single-use coffee cups later this year, will lose out commercially to the environmental laggards.

I wish to highlight several key recommendations from the Environmental Audit Committee that we would like to see in the waste strategy later this year. The first is a post-2020 target recycling rate of 65%. Even the UK’s own estimates have found that that would save almost £10 billion over a decade in waste sector, greenhouse gas and social costs. Last year, I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), why the UK’s recycling rate had stagnated and whether the Government were opposing an EU target to recycle 65% of municipal waste by 2035. She would not confirm or deny that, and she blamed everyone but the Government for the UK’s poor performance, particularly local authorities, which we know simply do not have the resources to do this, and consumers.

Secondly, we need manufacturers to pay significantly more towards the recycling of the packaging used for their products. We urgently need a new framework for producer responsibility, which we have heard about. The prevalence of items such as black plastic, Lucozade bottles with plastic sleeves, coffee cups that cannot easily be recycled and Pringles tubes—they are the worst offenders as they are made of five different materials, each of which is notionally recyclable, but as one cannot be detached from the other, this is pointless—all point to the weakness of the current system. The Government used to boast that the UK's system of producer responsibility was run at the lowest cost to business in the EU, but that comes at a cost to society, as cash-starved local authorities and taxpayers are paying 90% of the cost of collection. That is a complete reversal of the “polluter pays” principle.

Thirdly, I wish to highlight the Committee's recommendation that the Government phase in a mandated minimum 50% rPET—recycled polyethylene terephthalate—content for the production of new plastic bottles by 2023. That would create a UK market for recycled plastic, which at the moment is struggling against low oil prices, as that makes new plastic cheaper.

In conclusion, I hope that we see from the Government a radical waste strategy that addresses the stagnating rates of recycling; the inefficiencies arising from having so many different recycling collection systems in operation; and the poor state of our recycling infrastructure, which has been deprived of investment because of the illogical PRN system. We could be world leaders in waste management and resource efficiency. Now is the time for the Government to seize the moment and act.

2.2 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I must apologise to the House and to the Minister for not being able to say for the end of the debate; I have a pressing engagement in my constituency. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on securing this debate. It is such a shame it is on a Thursday afternoon, when, like me, many people need to be in their constituency, because it is an important debate and the whole House should be getting behind it.

I was one of the MPs who tried to give up single-use plastics for Lent—like many, I completely failed. I did my level best. My husband even did his level best. He does the shopping now. He took containers to the supermarket to get things without a plastic bag. He took brown paper bags. However, this was not easy. The one lasting difference it has made is that we have bought a yoghurt making machine and we do not buy yoghurt any more—we make it ourselves. However, it is extremely difficult to manage without single-use plastics. The hon. Lady talked about cups in the street, but I wonder whether she noticed the plastic bottles after the London marathon, which were dozens deep along the streets. That is wrong. We need to keep runners hydrated, but using single-use plastics to do so is such a waste of resources.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I was one of the MPs who took part in the London marathon. In a slight defence of the marathon organisers, I should say that they did trial paper cups along the route for the first time to try to reduce the plastics. The hon. Lady is right

to put what she said on the record, but the organisers are probably mindful of that and that is why we had quite an innovative time this year.

Mrs Latham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, but there were millions of these bottles on the streets and that is a total waste of resources; after one quick slug, they were thrown away. When I came to London from Derby on the train this week, I saw notices at the station saying, “Keep hydrated. Carry a bottle of water with you.” However, the station had nowhere where people could fill a bottle up with water, although we are given bottles of water on the train. That is unacceptable because those bottles are not recycled.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I, too, took part in the London marathon and I can tell my hon. Friend that having a bottle was far better than having a cup because when you are jogging along you are going to bounce a lot of liquid out of the cup. Would it not be a really important innovation if both the top and the body of the bottle were made of the same plastic, as that would make recycling easier?

Mrs Latham: That would make recycling much easier. In the future, if we have the machines that will take these bottles, lots of entrepreneurial young people will be going to get these bottles and getting the money back. That scheme is a good idea, but we need to change the way people behave; we need to stop them using these things. The London marathon is a difficult case, because people need to keep hydrated when they are running.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), children are really interested in this problem and they really care. They need to educate their parents, who tend to throw the rubbish out of the car window. We also need to continue this education when students get to university, because once they get there, they forget many of the lessons they learned when they were younger. We need to continue that education and make sure universities are places where both recycling and encouraging people not to use these plastics in the first place are very high priorities. I am not going to steal the thunder of my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who is the Chairman of the Administration Committee, on which I serve, but I wish to mention the steps the Committee has taken and the recommendations of the House authorities, who have done an amazing job. We asked them to look at the problem within the House and they have gone a step further, and we are going to have radical change in this place. The House of Lords has agreed to this, too, so it will take place through both Houses. I am delighted about that, but I am sure we will hear the facts and figures later when my hon. Friend will be discussing this.

I also wish to commend the Foreign Office because it has made a big impact. It has introduced the latte levy and improved it, increasing it from 10p to 50p. The Foreign Office has got rid of plastic cups, crockery, cutlery, straws and single-use condiment sachets from all its London staff canteens. It is also providing reusable or biodegradable alternatives.

[Mrs Latham]

I am sorry I will not be here to hear the Minister's answer on this because I am concerned about biodegradable products. I believe they just go into smaller pieces, animals still eat them and this is still going to cause a problem. If we can come up with innovative solutions, we can reduce the overall amount of plastic waste.

I read about a scheme where a community in the south-west took all its non-recyclable waste back to the supermarket at the end of one month. That was a huge amount of waste. The aim was to show the supermarket what a huge problem it is. We heard earlier about products such as Pringles, where the packaging is made of five different materials. I do not know whether some of these plastics are recyclable or not, because the logos are very confusing—given that I am interested in this subject, this is probably a problem for most people.

Instead of just us in this House changing our behaviour, every Department should be instructed to stop using single-use plastics. We cannot criticise other people unless the whole of government, in every Department, be it in London or in places such as the Department for International Development's office in Glasgow, stops using this plastic. We will then be able to say to people, "We have put our house in order. Will you put yours in order?"

Time is short, so I shall finish by saying that instead of just not using the plastics, we ought to be investing money in trialling ways of reusing the plastics that are used. I understand that in Mexico houses are being built from plastic bottles. These houses are cheap and sustainable, and they will last for 500 years. We should invest in such alternative uses for plastics, if we have to have some of them, instead of just saying that we will burn them or put them into landfill if they cannot be recycled.

It is really important that the Government lead the world, and they need to lead from the front. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is incredibly keen on recycling and all things green, and I commend him for his energy and enthusiasm, but I am unhappy about the environment plan running for 25 years. I would like to see things happen much faster, and I would like the Government to look into investing in alternative technologies.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I just say that the advice is seven minutes per speech, so can we please stick to that? I do not want to impose a time limit, but I do want to make sure that everyone gets to speak. Please think of the others, especially if people will not be here at the end of the debate.

2.10 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to take part in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) and other colleagues.

It was an email from a constituent that I received in either the latter part of 2010 or the early part of 2011 that first made me think about this issue. It came just in advance of the Welsh Government's introduction of a

5p levy on plastic bags. For many of us, that was a pioneering step, and quite a novel one. To be honest, we did not know quite how it would go. However, my constituent had no doubts: in his view, it was going to be an absolute disaster. He thought it would deprive him of all his liberty. Moreover, he made the point that if the Welsh Government went ahead with the charge, he would start his own boycott and do all his shopping across the border in England. I did not want too long a discussion with him, but we did end up with an interesting exchange of emails. I told him about the four cloth bags that I keep in the back of my car and always take shopping with me. He responded by saying that as a true Briton—as he described himself—and a passionate believer in the liberty of the individual, he thought that the plastic bag charge was an absolute outrage.

That exchange made me think at the time, and I have thought subsequently, that if people want to introduce changes to protect the environment, there will inevitably be people with whom those changes will not be popular. Many of these sorts of changes involve changes in our everyday lifestyles. At the time of the introduction of the 5p levy, I met someone—I do not know whether he was related to the person who wrote to me—who had another view on the subject. He thought that it was obvious—was it not?—that the people of Wales were going to resort to carrying all their shopping in black bin bags. I confess that I never did see 2.8 million to 3 million people walking around with their shopping in black bin bags thereafter, but it is interesting to think about what happens when changes such as these are introduced.

As was mentioned earlier, those of a younger generation pick up on these issues more quickly than those of us of a slightly older generation, because with their school eco-councils, they are probably much more instinctively aware of this issue than we are. Of course, plastic bottles are a particular case in point. Historically, campaigning radicals have often taken up the issue of the land—I think "God gave the land to the people" was Michael Foot's favourite campaigning song—but there have been very few references in the English language to water. As we wax lyrical about water companies and whether they should be privately owned, publicly owned and all the rest of it, we forget the fundamental point: water is totally natural. It comes from the ground and we can get it from a tap. I do wonder why we do not make more effort to make water fountains more available. They should be much more common in our country. I really welcome the fact that the Welsh Government are looking into ways to increase the supply of water fountains and similar outlets so that we can access water that way. There is no earthly need for us to have to buy our water in plastic bottles and carry them around with us.

We should also look at examples from other countries. When I worked in Japan in the early 1990s, there was a great debate there about disposable chopsticks—or *waribashi*, as they are called in Japanese. The schoolchildren of Japan basically took matters into their own hands, and pretty much every school then decided that the young of Japan would bring to school permanent chopsticks, which they carried in little cases, to use every day. The idea caught on in companies and more widely. I wonder whether it is time that we acted similarly and bought bottles that we can refill with water.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): My hon. Friend has taken us a slight distance away from the subject at hand, but I must say that I am always willing to listen to any discussion about disposable Japanese chopsticks. On water fountains, when she looks around the Chamber, is she not as horrified as I am to see these carafes and glasses of water? Would it not be an excellent idea to have a water fountain adjacent to the Speaker's Chair, and perhaps one opposite each of the Front Benches, with disposable, biodegradable cups? Let us start as we mean to go on and let this place be an example to the nation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I think we will carry on using glasses, which are absolutely environmentally friendly.

Susan Elan Jones: Glasses and glass carafes are very environmentally friendly, but my hon. Friend's comments are of course very interesting, as ever.

I wish to make a serious plea. The hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) referred to the glass bottle scheme of the 1970s and 1980s, and how we all enjoyed collecting extra pennies by returning glass bottles. Around that time, probably in the 1970s, it was the Wombles generation and there was a great deal of interest in all these issues. It sometimes seems to me that we really have not gone a lot further down that road. I hope that we can redouble our efforts and look into more options, whether for plastic bottles or other things, because if we do not, as a society and as a world we will have far, far greater problems.

2.17 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on securing this debate. Incidentally, all the chopsticks that are used in my home are reusable and washed, and most have been going for around 30 years. This debate is overdue; I say that having read some years ago about the difficulties they have had with rubbish on Mount Everest. There was a report last week about a plastic bag found at the bottom of one of our deepest ocean ravines. And there is just everything in between.

I shall use the few minutes available to draw Members' attention to the previously mentioned report on the Palace of Westminster's efforts—like it or lump it, it has now been through the system—to get rid of single-issue and single-use plastics, to the best of our ability. An extensive action paper on the issue was accepted by the Administration Committee, and it was accepted by the House of Commons Commission on Monday. Last week, it was accepted by the equivalent Committees in the other place.

I congratulate and thank the officials who took up the challenge on our behalf and who were exceptionally imaginative in their ideas. As many Members will be aware, we now have a progressive programme to remove single-use plastics. It is going to take us around 12 months. I wrote a letter to every Member to explain it, which means that around a 10th of them have read it. I expect complaints and so on; if Members who are oriented the right way receive complaints, can they put them down and thereby save me from having to respond?

All the usual single-use plastics culprits will go. I can assure the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) that water will be provided from taps, instead of

in plastic bottles, the use of which will stop. There will be a tariff on single-use coffee cups. This, of course, is to bully coffee and tea drinkers into using reusable mugs. Disposable catering items, which will remain for a while at least, will be replaced with those made of compostable materials. Some of these items will strike us as being really quite unusual and new. For example, salads and similar are currently presented in clear plastic containers. The new ones will look the same, but our officials have discovered a source of compostable plastic, which was produced—I think—in only 2015. We will certainly test it and see how it goes.

The team looked beyond catering. Plastic bags will be replaced by paper bags. We are implementing a green stationery catalogue. A pilot scheme for reusing packaging for deliveries has commenced. The volume of waste of single-use plastic of delivered goods here is unbelievable. The list of things to do is not endless, but it is long, so I will not be tempted, in the time that I have available, to go through it with all the figures.

Interestingly, the parliamentary Environment Team is now looking at the environmental cost of other materials that we use and comparing and contrasting them. In other words, it is a case of watch this space: we have started and we are on our way. I am an ethnic minority immigrant, as my accent says. I come from a small country, which can be environmentally friendly to the degree of being paranoid. Our approach in the Houses of Parliament now fits that approach, and so it should.

2.21 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) and to hear of the changes that are coming to the House over the next year.

Plastics help to make a wide range of very useful, durable, versatile products, and, in their own way, they do contribute to sustainability. Thanks to plastic, our shampoo bottles do not shatter in the shower when they are dropped, our cars and trucks weigh less and therefore use less fuel, and our homes are better insulated and save energy. We ship more goods with less packaging than ever before. However, as we have heard today, and I think that we all agree, plastics come with an environmental cost. None of us wants to see the plastics, or trash of any kind, end up in our countryside, our water courses and eventually our oceans. To challenge this end-of-pipe problem, plastics organisations from around the world have joined together in "The Declaration of Global Plastics Association for the Solutions on Marine Litter", which is informally known as the global declaration. That was completed in 2011 and, unfortunately, up to now only 75 plastics organisations and allied industries, which represent more than 40 countries, have voluntarily signed up to it. There was a commitment contained in that to take action and, more importantly, to make measurable progress.

I draw the attention of the House to Net-Works, an organisation in the central Philippines, which deals with recycling ghost fishing nets taken from the oceans; the plastic straw product stewardship scheme in the US and north America; and, indeed, Upcycling the Oceans, the Thailand project to rehabilitate the coastlands by removing the waste from the oceans. I also wish to draw Members'

[Martin Whitfield]

attention to the UK's contribution to this declaration, which is called Operation Clean Sweep. In East Lothian, the charity Fidra is championing plastic waste awareness. It often ran campaigns in the past about plastic straws and it is now concentrating on nurdles.

Nurdles are the small plastic pellets that are used to make the plastic bottles, the coffee cups, and the objects that we see. Nurdles are, in essence, raw plastic, and the problem is how they are transported around the world. Sadly, an astronomically large number of these nurdles escape during this process, and end up in our oceans. Like microbeads, once they are in our oceans, they are almost impossible to take out. Indeed, Fidra has used beach clean-ups to raise awareness among children. When schoolchildren went on a nurdle hunt at Yellowcraig, a particularly beautiful beach in East Lothian, they discovered 400 nurdles in just five minutes. It is a phenomenal amount to be washed up on our beaches, and industrial spillage and mishandling is the cause of this nurdle escape. The nurdles then float and travel around the world.

Operation Clean Sweep seeks to educate industry to provide ways and strategies to reduce the loss and escape of these nurdles, but, again, this is an end-of-pipe product. It is before the plastic gets into our chains that we need to look. This in turn brings me to the types of plastic that we use. We should move to a mandated minimum use of rPET content in plastic objects. PET is an acronym for polyethylene terephthalate, which makes up plastic, and when it is recycled it becomes rPET. Is it too much to hope that products such as coffee cups and water bottles could contain at least 50% rPET by, say, 2020?

Plastic cups are the end product of a process that many good people, charities businesses and organisations are trying to make sustainable and reusable. I am thinking of the lobster hatchery in North Berwick, founded by Jane McMinn, Davis Grubb and Jack Dale who see our oceans not as a dumping ground, but as an opportunity for sustainable inshore fishing. Indeed, the award-winning Seabird Centre in East Lothian sees the results of oceanic plastic pollution miles and miles from these shores. These are the people who are advocating responsibility.

However, our young people and our volunteer groups and charities will not be enough without political and, if necessary, legislative support. The EU is promoting the target of 2030 as the year by which member states should have phased out single-use plastics. The UK Government's proposal of a 25-year environment plan appears to be, with all due respect, more of a repackaging of existing policies and previous announcements. I sincerely hope that the repackaging is not in plastic.

It is our children who go to the beach clean-ups, and our surfers who use our water. Through the conduit of the plastic whale, which was mentioned earlier, and the nurdle hunts, these people attack the issue with passion, enthusiasm and commitment, but those young people now who are cleaning beaches will be in their 30s by the time these Government policies come in. We owe them more than that.

2.26 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield). His speech was fantastic all the way through,

but particularly at the beginning when he highlighted the importance of plastic and how it can be used to improve our environment. I thought that that was a really important point to make.

As so often, Bolton West leads the way and sets the agenda, and never more so than when it comes to the environment and recycling. Maiden speeches often set a strong agenda for hon. and right hon. Members, so I hope colleagues will not mind me quoting from *Hansard*. It says that

"our society has yet to recognise that we cannot afford the luxury of wasting so many of our limited resources. We cannot continue for ever adopting the shortsighted attitude of a society in which everything must be disposable, in the short term at least. Today we live in a society where the paper cup and paper tablecloth, and even paper sheets and plastic spoons, are taken for granted. We never count the real cost of these items. Planned obsolescence is now accepted by our society and we are now conditioned not to expect anything to last any length of time.

There are many different ways in which our society wastes its resources. For example every housewife knows, when she empties her shopping bag and puts away the shopping, how much paper, rubbish, cardboard, polystyrene and all sorts of other packaging ends up in the dustbin. We have layer upon layer of excessive and expensive packaging, most of which is not needed to maintain the quality of the goods we buy. If one buys a pound of apples in a supermarket today, one buys also a plastic tray and a load of cellophane. The housewife cannot afford the extra cost of all this, and the country cannot afford the waste and misuse of resources in this way."—[*Official Report*, 12 November 1974; Vol. 881, c. 292.]

That was not my maiden speech. It was the maiden speech of one of my predecessors—Ann Taylor, Member for Bolton, West. She was speaking in 1974 about the importance of recycling and not having this consumer throwaway society. I look to my colleagues and friends in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—the most exciting and dynamic Department that we have in Parliament—to continue the work they are doing and to pursue this agenda. Let us not wait until 2062 to have yet another debate on this subject. Let us get there; let us do it now.

2.29 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): As a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, it is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I thank the Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), for securing it.

Plastic is one of the most successful man-made materials in history and has brought immeasurable benefits to our everyday lives, but it is causing immeasurable damage to our environment. Back in the 1950s, when the mass production of plastics started, the world produced 2 million tonnes of plastic per year; now, we are producing over 330 million tonnes. We are only now starting to learn about micro-plastics—tiny particles that have made their way into the food chain. A study in the US found that 95% of all adults tested had in their urine a known carcinogenic chemical from plastic, and scientists based at the State University of New York found that 90% of bottled water also contained those micro-plastics. We do not yet know for sure the impact of these micro-plastics on human health, but we do know that it is already too late to find a suitable sustainable alternative.

Voluntary return schemes and reusable cups are all great initiatives, and initiatives that I support, but they do not go far enough. We need a statutory scheme; sustainability must be enshrined in law. The Government

must have legally binding environmental limits on plastic waste, air pollution, soil degradation, resource depletion and biodiversity loss. The 25-year plan includes these, but does not have any specific short-term targets that the Government must act on now. The burden is, therefore, rolled further down the line to whoever is appointed the next Secretary of State, or the one after that, or the one after that.

I am pleased that the Committee has now made concrete proposals that the Government can act on right now. These include the Government implementing a producer responsibility structure under which companies producing packaging are held accountable for the type of packaging they produce and burdened with fees when their products fall below our environmental standards.

We also recommend that the Government introduce a regulation whereby all public premises that serve food must provide drinking water on request. This reform is as much a cultural issue as it should be a legal issue, because it requires more people to feel comfortable asking for water to fill reusable bottles or using glass cups instead of buying water bottles that will later be disposed of. However, because reducing the use of disposable bottles is a cultural shift that will not happen overnight, the Government should introduce a deposit return scheme for plastic drinks bottles to facilitate their recycling.

The most important point, which was repeated throughout our Committee hearings, is that the changes the Government aspire to in their 25-year plan need to be enshrined in law, together with proper short-term targets, so that companies can have the confidence to invest in these policies, secure in the knowledge that the Government have created a legal framework and an equal playing field for all. Currently, businesses that take such action can face a financial burden. This should not be a cost issue for those at the forefront of action.

The Government also need to establish shorter-term milestones in their plastic reduction targets. A 25-year plan is not enough when imminent action is needed. That is why we are asking that the Government set the target that all single-use coffee cups disposed of in recycling bins should be recyclable by 2023. We are also asking that they set a specific recycling target for disposable coffee cups in their upcoming waste and resources strategy, which is due this year, and a post-2020 recycling rate of 65%.

The Environment Secretary's rhetoric on curbing plastic waste has been skilful and effective in convincing many that he truly cares about this issue and the environment. He lost no time when he got his new Cabinet role in publishing a 25-year plan full of promises that we could all get behind, but it lacks legal certainty that action will be taken, and that is what we are asking the Government for today.

Wales has a world-class reputation in this area. As a special adviser to the Welsh Government for seven years, I am proud to have played my part in helping Wales to become a leading UK nation when it comes to recycling and waste reduction, as well as the third-best country in the world for recycling. I am also proud that we were the first country in the UK to bring in the carrier bag charge. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) about the period of its introduction—it was truly a difficult

time. I was at the forefront of hearing from the great retail lobby as it started to understand what this little Welsh Government were about to do. I am glad to have helped champion that cause and to see England follow—a mere seven years later. I am also pleased that only last week Welsh Ministers announced the key findings of research on extended producer responsibility focusing on reducing waste from six types of food and drink packaging. The “polluter pays” principle is core to resolving many of these issues.

I will finish on a positive note by sharing with the House a campaign we are running in my constituency to make Rhiwbina the first single-use-plastic-free community in Cardiff. I thank local resident Naomi England for helping to run that campaign. Our campaign is about encouraging local businesses to become as plastic free as possible and suggesting alternatives. We are working to roll it out across the constituency and the whole of Cardiff. It is about people in the community taking advantage of offers, playing their part by reusing bags and taking reusable coffee cups with them when they are out and about. That is not, however, a substitute for legislation.

I am particularly proud of one smaller constituent, seven-year-old Nathanael, who goes to Rhiwbina Primary School, and who went home one day to look at the waste that he and his family produced. He wrote to me:

“We noticed that we used a lot of meat trays and fruit/veg trays. We also noticed that these trays cannot be recycled. We also thought that the triangle symbol was hard to see on some plastics. We think labels should be clearer.”

So do I, Nathanael. I thank him for his input, and I hope the Government listen.

2.38 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The plastic bottles and coffee cups inquiry was my first large-scale inquiry as a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, and I thank the Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), for supporting me and the other new members of the Committee. It was a pleasure to listen to the evidence to what has proved such an influential inquiry. We have influenced the House and soon, I hope, we will influence Government policy.

Sometimes, sitting in a Committee listening to evidence, something quietly dawns on you, and this happened to me when we heard from the #OneLess campaign. I asked its project manager, Fiona Llewellyn:

“Do you think that there is scope to look at the licences of take-aways and fast food places so they have to provide access to tap water because that's the area where you see a lot of littering and food on the go?”

She replied:

“One of the reasons we have plastic packaged water is that it is convenient to have on the go, so if we can overcome some of the barriers to convenience for refilling that would be a wonderful step in the right direction to this wider problem of plastic pollution and what you suggest would be very welcome”.

That is a type of planning law that we could implement immediately to reduce the use of single-use plastic bottles.

The inquiry heard a whole load of evidence. The major measure identified was the deposit return scheme, to which many Members have alluded. Hon. Members

[Alex Sobel]

might think that all manufacturers are opposed to the deposit return scheme because it is a cost to their business, but many major companies are supportive. That includes Coca-Cola, which I believe is the world's largest drinks company. The company set out its support for the scheme in its evidence to the Committee. It actually had a number of recommendations for us, including that we should just have a single scheme, that the scheme should be managed by a not-for-profit organisation and, most amazingly, that the costs should be covered by producers and retailers. That has not come from the Committee, a lobby group or even the Government; that is from one of the world's largest companies and largest producers of plastic bottles. We should listen to Coca-Cola, which we might have expected to be on the other side of the debate.

During the inquiry, China announced that it would no longer accept plastic waste imports, so we had a separate session on Chinese plastic waste. The Chinese waste ban raises questions such as, where will all these plastic bottles go? We do not have the reprocessing capacity. We also looked at packaging recovery notes, concentrating on packaging export recovery notes. These are the licences needed to export plastic waste abroad. Clearly we are not having any for China because of the waste ban, but with PERNs to export waste, for example, to Vietnam, it is difficult to get a clear audit trail showing what happens to the plastic. We had evidence from Zero Waste Vietnam, which asked, "Why can't European countries recycle their own plastic materials? Why are we having to have to have shiploads of plastic materials that we are not able to recycle?"

Mary Creagh: There is some anxiety over the word "shiploads".

Alex Sobel: For the record, I did say shiploads—boatloads of materials. Zero Waste Vietnam is a very proper organisation; it would not resort to any foul language. In that case, a local organisation presented us with evidence that the plastic that we are exporting may not actually be recycled. That is the point of these export recovery notes.

Martin Whitfield: One of the great challenges of recycling is that the bottles and containers are often dirty when they go into system, and thus pollute whole loads. One of the great behavioural changes that we need to adopt is the ability to clean these containers ourselves before we submit them to be recycled.

Alex Sobel: We certainly do not want to see boatloads of dirty waste, so I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We also need a complete audit of our PERN system and should look at reform. If we are to export plastic, which I do not actually agree with, we need to know that it will be recycled when it arrives at its destination.

Although the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) is not in his place, I want to thank him. I have a copy of his letter, which I read carefully this morning. The recommendations of the Administration Committee are not only recommendations for this House; they are recommendations that the Government should

consider and which present a holistic approach to tackling the use of plastic. The letter mentions ending sales of plastic water bottles. It also includes the latte levy, which we will not have outside this place, but we will have here. The Committee proposes that we incentivise the use of reusable cups through loyalty rewards and that we get rid of condiment sachets. I was amazed to read how much sauce we eat in this place. We consume 334,800 sachets of sauce a year; we are a saucy lot in this House. I thank the Administration Committee and hope that the Government take on some of its saucy suggestions.

Stephen Pound: It is HP Sauce.

Alex Sobel: Absolutely.

I feel a lot of personal responsibility in this area. I recently visited I Am Döner, my local kebab shop in Headingley, where I ordered my normal falafel wrap. Its staff told me that they have gone completely plastic-free. They provide water in cans and all their packaging is non-plastic. That shop is an exemplar to us all. I thank Paul at I Am Döner for introducing those measures. He has inspired me to have a week in which I do not buy any single-use plastic, so I will be bombarding hon. Members from my social media accounts regarding my difficulties in avoiding any single-use plastics. I hope that the Administration Committee can hurry up with implementing its proposals so that I can eat here without having to use any single-use plastic. We all need to make a personal commitment, as well as pressing for change from the Government.

2.45 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). I am pretty sure that when this debate is replayed on BBC Parliament it will probably be on after the watershed. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) for opening the debate, and I thank the Liaison Committee for securing time for us to debate the issue.

Unusually, I want to pay tribute to the Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who is currently in his spot as PPS. This week he met a number of children who had come down from Glasgow and who have been doing some fantastic work. The children were from Sunnyside Primary School, which is actually my mother's old primary school, although it is much more innovative now. Those children are known as the Sunnyside Ocean Defenders, and they have really been making waves in Scotland with their campaign, #NaeStrawAtAw—I can clarify that for *Hansard* later.

The campaign expresses a desire to see a reduction in the use of single-use plastic straws, while also being mindful of people with disabilities still needing to access such products. I pay tribute to those kids, who came down here and challenged a huge number of MPs on this issue. Such issues are sometimes a bit popular, but these children are absolutely determined. That was reaffirmed to me later in the afternoon, when the group had a meeting with McDonald's. The children are currently running a campaign called "Pretty Deadly", which is about tackling the marketing gimmicks used by big companies, such as the balloons that they give away.

I cannot think of many companies in the world that have a more iconic brand than McDonald's, but the kids, quite rightly, really challenged the organisation, asking questions such as, "Why are you using these plastic balloons that blow away and sometimes end up in Norway or wherever?"

I was challenged not that long ago, during the Easter recess, when I went on holiday to Hammamet in Tunisia. This follows on from the point made by the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), who is no longer in her place.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): May I pay tribute to the Sunnyside Ocean Defenders? Those young students were so passionate, engaged and knowledgeable. They were interested in not just plastic but many different things in the world that they wanted to improve, including the protection of polar bears. I remember clearly that they also wanted to ban wild animals in circuses, which the Department is very keen to do. I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing those children down and pay tribute to them and their school.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman is, as ever, incredibly kind, and I am sure that that will be a great encouragement to them. I thank him for passing on a personalised plastic bottle—a reusable one, I must add—to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The kids really appreciated that, so I am very grateful.

I want to touch on one or two concerns that I have—as you might expect, Mr Deputy Speaker—as we approach Britain's exit from the European Union. Scottish National party Members believe that the SNP Government are leading the way on tackling waste, but that must not be threatened by the Government's attack on the devolution settlement. We very much support the European Commission's vision that all single-use packaging should be easily recycled or reusable by 2030. Devolution has been vital to ensuring that environmental policies and objectives are tailored to our ambition to meet those needs in Scotland, and I am concerned that any power grab from the UK Government could inhibit that.

I am conscious of time, and I promised not to ramble on, but there is one final point I want to make. I will finish where I started, by talking about the children of Sunnyside Primary. It is a school of conservation, and I am incredibly proud of that. Schools often have Latin mottos, but unusually, the motto of Sunnyside Primary is, "We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children." When making decisions as legislators in this House, that should always be at the forefront of our minds.

2.49 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): As a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, I too would like to thank the Backbench Business Committee and the Liaison Committee for allowing our concerns to be debated today. In particular, I want to praise the superb and diligent work of our staff and Committee members, led by our Chair, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh). It is an absolute pleasure to serve under her chairmanship.

I would like to comment on some points made earlier. The Chair of the EAC made fine points on Norway's scheme, which I will mention in a minute, and in particular her points on the "polluter pays" principle were not lost

on me. I urge all local authorities and organisations to write to the tobacco industry and ask it to plunder its war chest, because I believe they have a sizeable amount of money available for environmental issues. I was also impressed by the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), who demonstrated how business and communities are fully behind the whole recycling scheme.

There were many other excellent contributions and ideas from Members on both sides of the House. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned "Blue Planet". I am very grateful to the Bristol programme makers for producing such a high-quality awareness-raising narrative, which brought the seriousness of this issue into our living rooms. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) highlighted just how important it is for Members to work with the schoolchildren in our constituencies.

The EAC recommendations on plastic bottles and disposable coffee cups are both achievable and sensible. If we need proof—which we should not and do not—there are already packaging deposit return schemes for plastic bottles and coffee cups in 38 countries worldwide. Some, such as Germany, which we know has a huge economy and a large population, have managed to increase their packaging recycling rates to more than 90%. That begs the question: what is stopping this Government taking further steps?

Arguably the best example is Norway's deposit return scheme, which has achieved an enviable and staggering plastic recycling rate of 97% within three years of its launch. The Norwegian Government decided that the best method would be to tax every bottle that is not recycled, and then leave the operating details of the scheme up to businesses, which is a clear sign of respect and trust from all sides that they will do the right thing and accept responsibility. Norwegian shopkeepers and the public say that they generally favour the scheme, because people are paid a small fee for each returned bottle, and shops benefit from increased footfall when consumers return bottles and spend the money in their stores. That is good business.

Operators of the scheme say that it is more appropriate and sensible for people to pay for drink bottles to be recycled, rather than taxpayers having to pay for litter to be cleaned on streets and beaches. Clearly Norway has taken cognisance of human behaviour. The impartial spectator within us sees the morality of our actions. It is that conscience—the person within—that is the great judge and arbiter of our conduct and that tells us all we are doing something wrong, as we have been. The Norwegian Government have clearly been mindful of that and acted accordingly, so why are we not going further?

In 1984 Sweden introduced a deposit return scheme. Interestingly, in Sweden the process is known as "panta", which I believe means to return something and get money in return. In the early 2000s, Sweden created catchy commercials featuring musicians to raise awareness and incentivise people to "panta" more. That is good creative thinking, nudging people by creating a word for the scheme, and the public love it. Sweden now recycles something like 85% of its aluminium cans and polyethylene terephthalate—PET—bottles through its deposit return scheme. In contrast, as was mentioned earlier, the UK recycles only an estimated 57%.

[John Mc Nally]

All the environment groups say that the key to reducing waste in the UK is to economically incentivise consumers by placing a deposit on bottles. That in turn will make people less inclined to throw away that money and more inclined to recycle instead. All of us, in all parts of the UK, recognise the litter problem in this country caused by single-use coffee cups and plastic bottles. It is an absolute national embarrassment.

Scotland has come to similar conclusions to those of the EAC. The Scottish Government and business community are already taking steps. For example, the Scottish Government have set up a panel of experts to advise on policy development to tackle plastic pollution, disposable cups and plastic straws. It includes experts on human behaviour, economics, sustainable business, biotech and chemicals, environmental law and waste management, as well as advisers representing the interests of young people and the disabled. It is a truly all-encompassing group. That clearly demonstrates the manner in which the Scottish Government are tackling this problem.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East said, the Scottish Government absolutely support the EU Commission's vision that all plastic packaging should be easily recyclable by 2030. Devolution has been vital in ensuring that environmental policies and objectives are tailored to our ambitions in Scotland and to Scottish needs. Any change to our policies—to Scotland's distinctive and ambitious approach to environmental standards, regulations and climate change—is completely unacceptable. We were the first country in the UK to commit to introducing a deposit return scheme for drinks containers. We are good neighbours, so let the Westminster Government leave responsibilities where they lie, with the devolved Governments, and let the parties work together.

As we have heard, innovative companies large and small are competing to bring to market biodegradable or recyclable alternatives to commonplace products. For example, it is now possible to get a toothbrush made of recycled bamboo from a local shop. That is an absolutely wonderful invention. There is now a clutch of young companies selling beeswax-soaked cloth wraps as an alternative to cling film and aluminium foil for food storage. Publishing giant Penguin Random House has joined a new campaign on reducing plastics in the book industry. The campaign Authors4Oceans asks publishers and readers to reduce the amount of plastic they use, and presents greener alternatives to plastic-lined Jiffy bags. Waitrose has donated some £1 million to conservation society beach and river clean-ups, marine and plastics research and an innovative challenge fund. In my own constituency, the makers of Scotland's other national drink, A.G. Barr's Irn-Bru, were so far-sighted that they had a deposit return scheme before I was even born. I am looking forward to visiting Coca-Cola in East Kilbride tomorrow. I recently visited Tesco and Asda in Falkirk to see what actions they were taking in their local communities.

We stand at a privileged moment in time, at the forefront of a socioeconomic transition as it gains global momentum. The door is already ajar; we need only push it. Countries, businesses large and small, and individuals around the world have stopped fooling themselves about the need to put the world economy on

a sustainable footing. Corporate responsibility is now not a last-minute thought; it is at the heart and the core of ethical business thinking and policy. The dots have lined up, and we cannot ignore the picture they create. Companies and organisations need certainty of policy to invest their time and money securely. This Government are in a good position to give that certainty, with broad agreement across the whole political spectrum. The Environment Secretary tells us that there is

“no doubt that plastic is wreaking havoc on our marine environment”. Surely a cross-party agreement, and agreements with the devolved Administrations, would not be too hard to achieve.

Here in this Parliament, the Administration Committee is in the process of implementing the EAC's recommendations and more. Over the next few months, as we have heard, we shall see the end of sales of water in plastic bottles and a latte levy, and throughout the whole estate plastic packaging is to be replaced with compostable or reusable alternatives. If you want to change the world, you get busy in your own little corner, and the EAC has done just that. Personally, I would like to see the introduction of a colour-coded traffic light system on cups and bottles alongside a harmonised “binrastructure” with appropriate matching colours. That would remove the existing confusion among the public about where to place single-use items in bins.

I will finish with a quote from the Chair of my Committee:

“The UK's throwaway culture is having a devastating impact on our streets, beaches and seas. Our report recommended practical solutions to the disposable packaging crisis. The Government's response shows that despite warm words they plan no real action.”

I agree entirely with that statement and could not have put it better.

2.59 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) not just for securing what I think we would all agree has been an excellent debate, but for her valuable and extensive work on this area of policy. I also thank the other members of the Environmental Audit Committee who have taken part in the debate—my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), and the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally)—for the work they have done in bringing this important report to the House. We also had a contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), and my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) brought an interesting Welsh perspective to the debate.

When it comes to tackling plastic waste, I believe that the House is united in recognising the need for action. The UK uses 13 billion plastic bottles every year, yet only 7.5 billion are recycled, which means that the remaining 5.5 billion are landfilled, littered or incinerated. As the Environmental Audit Committee report has highlighted, if marine plastic continues to rise at its current rate, the amount of plastic in the sea will outweigh fish by 2050; I do not know who weighs the fish.

Although it is imperative that we do all we can domestically to tackle the plastics ending up in our seas, we must also bear in mind that ocean pollution is a

global issue that requires international co-operation and leadership. As long as there are countries and communities with inadequate or non-existent waste disposal infrastructure, litter and waste will continue to pollute our oceans. Will the Minister confirm the amount of spending that the Department for International Development has put towards improving waste infrastructure in developing countries in the past 12 months?

We have heard that the mix of plastic and paper in the lining of disposable coffee cups makes them very difficult to recycle. Currently, only a small number of specialist plants in Britain are able to process disposable coffee cups. That means that over 99% of the disposable coffee cups used in Britain do not get recycled. That is why the Committee's call for more research into recyclable coffee cups is so important, as is its call for greater clarity and awareness raising about how coffee cups can be recycled. The problem is that there still remains a significant public belief that coffee cups are easily recyclable, along with other paper or plastic items, when in fact they cannot be disposed of with household recycling.

On plastics, Labour supports the Committee's call for a plastic bottle deposit return scheme, as was outlined in our last manifesto. While behavioural change and reducing the consumption of single-use plastics is undoubtedly important, we must not lose sight of the bigger picture on waste and recycling, of which consumer behaviour is just one part. Currently, packaging producers pay for only 10% of the cost of packaging disposal and recycling, which leaves taxpayers to foot the bill for the remaining 90%. We have heard from hon. Members about the weakness of the current producer responsibility obligations, with our fees being among the lowest in Europe. We know that the PRN system is far from optimal, and that local authority practice in recycling varies quite wildly.

A comprehensive and effective strategy from the Government cannot just rely on righteous indignation and soundbites. We need comprehensive and ambitious reform of waste and recycling, and to look at many of the systemic, design and infrastructure barriers to waste reduction and recycling right across the UK. Never has this been so urgent as it is now, with the UK leaving the EU in only a few months and, as we have heard, in the light of the Chinese ban on dry recycling imports from the UK. Although we have had numerous promises and press releases, not one piece of primary legislation has been brought forward by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to date, despite the fact that, as I have said, we are now only months away from leaving the European Union. I am afraid that does not encourage confidence in the Secretary of State's assertions that environmental standards are not at risk with Brexit and that the UK is well prepared.

Last week, yet another consultation was launched, this time on the environmental principles and governance Bill. However, Shaun Spiers, the chair of Greener UK, says that the proposals will give the environment and countryside less protection after Brexit than exists now. Given the emphasis by the Environmental Audit Committee on the importance of the polluter pays principle, will the Minister confirm whether the precautionary and "polluter pays" principles will be enshrined in law before the UK leaves the EU?

How can the Secretary of State credibly claim to be upholding and improving environmental standards after Brexit when the environmental watchdog he proposes has been described by environmental experts as toothless and lacking adequate scope and powers? Only yesterday, the other place voted to ensure that existing environmental standards are maintained, recognising that inadequacy. The Government's plan announced in January to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste by 2042 is all well and good, but will the Minister confirm whether it is on track to be delivered? Does he believe that that ambition could, and should, be achieved sooner, and in line with EU targets?

In summary, I again welcome the important work done by the Environmental Audit Committee on single-use plastics and coffee cups, and its leadership in this area. We must use the current wave of public opinion to make lasting and meaningful change to recycling and waste, and to ensure that environmental standards in the UK are protected and strengthened in legislation, not just in Government press releases.

3.6 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on securing this debate, following her Committee's reports on plastic bottles and disposable coffee cups. We have heard a number of thoughtful and detailed contributions, and there is clearly cross-party consensus about the challenge we are seeking to address. Members from all parts of the United Kingdom have contributed, since this issue affects the entire UK.

The Government are determined to address the problem of plastic pollution. The Marine Conservation Society's Great British Beach Clean showed in its 2017 report that, on average in the UK, 718 pieces of litter were collected for every 100 metre stretch of beach surveyed. Litter from eating and drinking "on the go" made up 20% of all the rubbish found on our beaches, which shows the scale of the problem. As a number of hon. Members have pointed out, there has been a huge rise in public consciousness about this issue, and I especially acknowledge the producers of "Blue Planet II" for their revealing documentary series that has done huge amounts to raise public awareness of this challenge.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) and others spoke about the work done by schools in their constituencies, so I will take this opportunity to acknowledge the work done by a couple of schools in my area. A few weeks ago, pupils from Portreath Community Primary School travelled all the way from Cornwall to London to brief MPs about some of the work they are doing to encourage suppliers to their school to reduce the use of single-use plastics in their packaging. Recently, I faced a concerted campaign from pupils from Mount Hawke Academy, who are campaigning for Parliament to do more. Cornwall is also the home of Surfers Against Sewage, which campaigns nationally against marine pollution. It is at the forefront of the campaign to get parliamentary authorities to do more here to reduce our use of plastics. That campaign has been a success, and I am sure all hon. Members will welcome the steps announced this week by the parliamentary authorities to reduce the use of single-use plastics, including plastic water bottles and disposable cups. The intention to increase the availability of water dispensers is also good.

[George Eustice]

It is this Government's ambition to be the first generation to leave the natural environment in a better state than we found it. The 25-year environment plan that we published in January outlines the steps we propose to take to achieve our ambition.

A central part of the plan is the aim to use resources more wisely and to radically reduce the waste we generate. I would say our approach is contrary to the picture painted by the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). We believe and recognise that sustainable growth can go hand in hand with less waste and a better use of resources. We need to shift our economy away from one of making, using and disposing, to one where we can keep our resources in circulation for longer and maximise the value we get from them. We also want to reduce the environmental impacts of products by promoting reuse, remanufacturing and recycling.

The plan also includes the Secretary of State's four-point plan for specifically tackling plastic waste: cutting the total amount of plastic in circulation; reducing the number of different plastics in use; improving the rate of recycling; and supporting comprehensive and frequent rubbish and recycling collections, making it easier for individuals to know what goes in the recycling bin and what goes into general rubbish. More detail will be announced in our resources and waste strategy, which we will publish later this year, but we are already working to deliver on this ambition.

We agree with the Environmental Audit Committee that more needs to be done to increase the recycling of plastic drinks bottles. That is why we intend to introduce a deposit return scheme, which is aimed at boosting recycling rates and reducing littering of not just plastic bottles but other drinks containers, subject to consultation later this year. As the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) pointed out, a lot of work is being done right across the UK. The hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) invited us to look at some of the work being done in Wales. In Scotland, we are aware that the Scottish Government have been working and looking at deposit return schemes for some time. We are certainly keen to work with them and to learn from the work they have done to date.

We agree that making drinking water more readily available in public places will help to reduce the use of single-use plastic bottles. We are already taking action on this, too. Water companies, through Water UK, have been working to create a network of water refill points across England. We are working with them on this. Water companies in England have committed to publishing their plans for reducing single-use plastic bottles in September 2018.

The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), has written to a wide range of coffee chains, supermarkets, larger airports and transport hubs to encourage installation of free water bottle refill points. There has been a positive response, with most airports confirming they have refill points, and coffee chains and supermarkets committing to their installation. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) highlighted the challenge in train stations. We are encouraging water refill points in train stations, but they are not necessarily providing

the facilities to help people to top up. Network Rail is installing a trial refill point in Charing Cross station, with more to follow, if the pilot is successful, at 16 other stations it manages in England.

The Government have committed to removing all consumer single-use plastics from the central Government estate offices. Within the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, we have removed single-use plastic cups and are setting a requirement that new catering services exclude all single-use plastics. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as was noted in the debate, has also taken early steps to eliminate single-use consumer plastics from its procurement. We will be looking to other Departments to follow that lead.

I turn now to the issue of plastic straws and cotton buds. We are already taking steps towards reducing the scourge of avoidable plastic waste, with our pioneering microbeads ban and the 5p charge on carrier bags. We recently announced that we would go further and consult later this year on a potential ban on the sale of plastic straws, plastic drinks stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds in England. We recognise that in some circumstances plastic straws are the only viable option for some consumers, for example people with certain disabilities and other medical conditions. We would therefore be looking closely at providing exclusions for straws used for medical and other essential reasons when the legislation is introduced.

The issue of coffee cups dominated much of our debate. We want to see a significant reduction in the use of disposable coffee cups. I have seen reports in the media that the Government have apparently rejected the latte levy, which the hon. Member for Wakefield talked about, but that is not true. We genuinely have an open mind. Clearly, the 5p single-use plastic bag charge has had a big impact and far fewer are being sold today. These types of incentives can change consumer behaviour. That is why, in his spring statement, the Chancellor launched a call for evidence, which closes tomorrow, seeking views on how the tax system or charges could reduce the waste from a broader range of single-use plastics. The call for evidence is clear that we will consider a levy on disposable cups, and we are seeking views on that idea as part of that call for evidence.

However, we should also give credit to the coffee and other retail chains where they are taking the initiative on increasing the recycling of disposable cups. We are encouraged by the action being taken by packaging companies and retailers—for example, as part of the Paper Cup Recovery and Recycling Group. More than 100 local authorities have signed up and we would encourage more to join. I also understand that some coffee retail chains are already taking action to reduce single-use coffee cups by offering discounts to customers with reusable cups and are putting in place the infrastructure to ensure that cups can be collected for recycling. I welcome the announcement by Costa Coffee that, by 2020, it will recycle 500 million disposable cups, the equivalent of its yearly sales.

We disagree with some recommendations in the EAC report. For instance, we do not agree with the recommendation that the Government should ban disposable cups if 100% of those disposed of in recycling bins are not recycled in the next five years. The reason for that was touched on by the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who made the point about

some of the challenges created by contamination. Targets need to be not only challenging, but realistic and obtainable, and we believe that 100% recycling from collection is unobtainable as there will always be contamination in the waste stream, either from the beverage or from other items disposed of alongside the cup. However, we recognise that targets and incentives can be critical to successfully driving the right behaviour. We recognise the need to stimulate markets for secondary materials and, as part of our resources and waste strategy, we will look at the whole system from end to end to make sure that it is working effectively through a range of push and pull factors.

The hon. Member for Wakefield touched on producer responsibility schemes, as did a number of other hon. Members, and she pointed out some of the weaknesses. I think she will be happier with the Government's position on this issue. We have already committed to reviewing our current producer responsibility schemes so that they can better incentivise producers to be more resource-efficient. We aim to reform the packaging waste regulations to encourage businesses to design their packaging products in a more sustainable way, to encourage the greater use of recycled materials in those products and to stimulate the increase of collection, reprocessing and recycling of packaging waste. As part of our upcoming resources and waste strategy, we will set out options for the kind of packaging waste producer responsibility system that we think will best deliver our ambitions.

We want to support people to be able to recycle more and to encourage people to recycle on the go. We outline some actions to support that in our litter strategy. In addition, WRAP—the Waste and Resources Action Programme—has produced a guide for local authorities on improving recycling on the go facilities. We have established a working group to explore and identify best practice in improving bin infrastructure—my speaking note uses the new word “binrastructure”, which the hon. Lady used; for the benefit of *Hansard*, I did not abbreviate it—but there is certainly a great deal that we can do in that area.

To conclude, we believe that this is a very important issue. Our resources and waste strategy will address many of these issues. We also have consultations coming up on banning plastic straws, plastic stirrers and cotton buds, and on introducing a deposit return scheme. I believe that the Government are taking these reports and this issue seriously and that we can work together to achieve these aims.

3.19 pm

Mary Creagh: I warmly thank the Minister for his remarks. In respect of the disposable coffee cup ban, let me say to him that the target must not only be realistic

and achievable, but must be set on just the right side of impossible if industry is to make the changes that all of us in the House want to see. I welcomed his warm words, but I exhort him to act quickly. As other Members have said, the waste and resources strategy is now overdue, and is slipping back.

We have heard some excellent contributions from Members who said that they were thinking globally but acting locally. The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) spoke of the Putney plastics pledge. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about the great work of City to Sea and Surfers Against Sewage. The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) told us about her difficulties in giving up plastic for Lent; we also heard her reflections on the London marathon.

From my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), we heard about the difficulties experienced by the Japanese in banning single-use chopsticks. The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) told us that we could look forward to a green stationery catalogue, which is a genuine innovation in this place. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) observed that 40 years ago our colleague Ann Taylor, who now sits in the other place, was reflecting on plastics use. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) explained how Wales came to have the third highest recycling rate in the world. I look forward to my invitation from my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) to I Am Döner, where I hope we will be able to pump out some sauce—which he certainly did in his speech. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) talked about the fantastic work of Sunnyside Primary School.

We know what we must do. Our report tells us how we are to get there. It points the way. It explains how we can create jobs, stimulate a circular rather than a linear economy, and do the right thing with a higher recycling rate. We want to see the polluter pay, and I want to see the gum and cigarette butt producers play their part in that. Waste has been a Cinderella industry for too long. We are taking it into the limelight where it belongs, to create green jobs in every nation and every region of this country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the First and Second Reports of the Environmental Audit Committee, Plastic Bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide, HC 339, and Disposable Packaging: Coffee Cups, HC 657; and urges the Government to accept their recommendations as part of its Resources and Waste Strategy.

International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia

3.22 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the international day against homophobia, transphobia and biphobia.

I thank all the Members who supported the application for the debate: I am very grateful to them. I am also grateful to the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), who not only supported the debate but, via the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights—which he chairs—gave a huge amount of resource and support to all of us who will be speaking in it. I welcome the Minister to her place. She often talks about global Britain, but I see that she is wearing global Britain today as well. That is great to see. I know that the whole House will want to express gratitude to the many campaigning and support organisations that have been updating and informing us in advance of the debate, but also—most important of all—for the work they do day in, day out to give voice to some of the world's most isolated and vulnerable people.

This is an important day to me and for many others. Normally I spend it down in Brighton, where each year a community of people gather in public to mark the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. A little later today, this year's gathering will take place in the heart of Brighton, where speeches will be followed by performances by the Rainbow Chorus. Then, as always, will come my favourite part of the event: everyone present is invited to make the loudest noise that they possibly can for a whole minute. People will clap, scream, cheer, and bang on any instrument to hand. Let me tell anyone who has not experienced it that it is a little bit like Prime Minister's Question Time. *[Laughter.]* The symbolism is clear: when it comes to hate and discrimination, you do not stand by quietly; you make a noise.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate. Does he agree that it is incumbent on all of us in this place, not only those who identify as LGBTQ, to stand up and ensure that this sort of discrimination is stamped out in society? I thank him for mentioning Pride. Although I do not identify as LGBT, I have previously enjoyed many Pride events.

Peter Kyle: I welcome my hon. Friend's comments and can assure the House that she is a supporter of the LGBT community in general and also of those of us as individuals who are LGBT; we certainly call her a great friend.

The UK's equality advances have been profound in recent decades. For millions of people around the world the legal rights and protections we enjoy and the journey towards the normalisation of same-sex relationships in every aspect of life here must seem like another planet entirely. Normalisation is more radical than it sounds, but for a young person questioning their sexual or gender identity to see somebody whose success in science,

sport, business or politics is the first thing they know about them and their sexuality the last is more empowering than we often think.

But just because we are on that journey does not mean we have reached the destination. Bill Clinton said that one of the lessons he had learned from his time as President is that once a politician achieves something in office, they can never bank it and move on; they must always defend it and make the case afresh for future generations. In the age of rising populism former President Clinton's advice seems especially relevant to the equality agenda, and I take this challenge seriously. My argument to present and future generations for why we have to both maintain the existing rights and protections for the LGBT community and LGBT people and continue to press forward is simple: I believe that equality has strengthened our society at every step, not weakened it.

It has also strengthened some of our great institutions. Back when the House was debating whether to allow LGBT people to serve in the military, there was strong opposition, with one Member stating:

"If parents felt that the forces condoned homosexuality, a large number of them would do their best to resist the recruitment of their children."—*[Official Report, 9 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 489.]*

And the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) said when shadow Secretary of State for Defence that

"lifting the ban would adversely affect operational effectiveness."—*[Official Report, 12 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 289.]*

Less than 20 years later things are very different.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): In support of what the hon. Gentleman has said, may I point out that one of the Guards battalions in the second world war was widely recognised as being full of gay men and it was reckoned to be the bravest and most steadfast battalion of the Guards?

Peter Kyle: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments with an open heart; I am very grateful for them and look forward to learning more about that battalion, because I am very interested.

Bob Stewart: I would not mention the battalion by name.

Peter Kyle: That speaks volumes about the era we are moving on from and that which we are moving towards.

Operational effectiveness is not only affected by greater diversity; I would argue that our forces remain the best, most professional and most formidable in the world, but their culture has been vastly improved. When President Trump recently tried to ban trans people from serving in the US military the reaction from Britain's military high command was not only revealing, but was something we should all be extremely proud of. The Second Sea Lord, Vice-Admiral Jonathan Woodcock, said he was:

"So proud of our transgender personnel. They bring diversity to our Royal Navy and I will always support their desire to serve their country."

He added:

"I suspect many who doubt the abilities of our diverse service personnel might be more reluctant to serve than they are to comment."

If I was in a fight, I would want a Sea Lord or two on my side. Well, we are in a fight and, as Bill Clinton warned, there are people not only trying to halt progress, but to turn the clock back. And it is crystal clear now, based on evidence, that excluding LGBT people from serving in our military would adversely affect operational effectiveness, not the opposite.

The same is true for gay marriage. The inclusion of same-sex couples into one of the oldest and most important of our institutions has not undermined its worth or value, but has proven it fit for the 21st century.

The lesson from these examples is clear: equality is not a zero-sum game. When a trans person serves in the military, it does not weaken the values that lead to an effective fighting team; it strengthens them. When a gay couple gets married, the value of a straight couple's marriage is not suddenly diminished; it is strengthened by being in a partnership that is understood with empathy by more people. This needs to be understood as we look into the future and tackle the areas where more progress needs to be made. More than a third of lesbian and gay people disguise who they are at work, for fear of discrimination. That figure is even higher for people who are bisexual. It angers me that employers are overlooking so many lost opportunities, let alone productivity, because these are the things that come from a workforce that is at ease and able to celebrate the individual characteristics that make us who we are.

Here I want to pay tribute to Mr Speaker. In his time in office, he has relentlessly championed diversity and equality throughout the Commons. The results have been reflected in the Stonewall diversity index, but even more importantly, they have been part of the lived experience of people of the LGBT community who work here. I have worked in some pretty strange places in my time, especially during my years as an aid worker, but the Chamber here is by far the strangest. Sometimes, it is the most hostile work environment possible, but in my three years here, I have never experienced homophobia. The Chamber is a tough place to work, but it is a friendly place for lesbian, gay and bisexual people to be who they are. I hope that the time will soon arrive when the same can be said for trans people, too. The lesson from every other workplace is simple: this does not happen by accident. It happens only when good and determined people make it happen, and for that the Speaker has my full thanks.

Universities now need to learn the lessons, too. A third of trans students have experienced negative comments and 14% have considered dropping out due to harassment or discrimination by students or staff. The number of hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender has increased in recent years, not fallen, and the importance of engaging employers in the fight for equality is ever more important.

While researching for this debate, I was surprised to learn about some of the issues around bisexuality. For example, I did not know that only 12% of bisexual men were out, compared with 77% of gay men. Campaigners have spoken to me about the lack of bisexual magazines, apps, websites, groups and venues in which to meet and socialise. Because a lot of research covers the LGBT community as a whole, little is done to understand the specific sexual health issues surrounding the bisexual community, for example. These are issues that need addressing as we move forward.

Other hon. and right hon. Members will give more detail about the international issues, and I look forward to hearing them, but I cannot conclude without briefly referencing the international situation. Seventy-two countries around the world still criminalise same-sex relationships, 36 of which are Commonwealth member states. Ninety per cent. of the Commonwealth's citizens live in jurisdictions where same-sex conduct is a criminal offence. I certainly welcome the Prime Minister's apology for the UK's historical role in bequeathing those laws to many of those countries, and her setting up of a £5.6 million fund to help countries to reform their laws accordingly, but we must not relent in our diplomatic pressure to reform those laws wherever they exist.

Here in Britain, we are entering the Pride season, and we will be enjoying the freedom that is denied to so many people abroad. Brighton and Hove Pride is on 4 August, when 250,000 people, including Britney Spears, will be taking to the streets and parks of the great city of Brighton and Hove. The fact that Pride is wrapped up in one big party means that people often do not see how important it is to individuals and to the LGBT community as a whole. I well remember standing hidden in the crowds, watching from afar as people marched, danced and cheered, celebrating who they were. Even though it was happening right there in front of me, it seemed a terrifying distance away to someone who was not yet out. Several years later, after I had come out, I remember marching for the very first time. I had never been so self-conscious in my entire life, believing that every single one of the thousands of people lining the streets was standing there staring at me and judging. How things have changed! Now that I march as a politician, I would love every single one of them to be standing there staring at me. What they are doing, however, is enjoying Pride for what it is today. Everyone in that crowd is there for their own reason.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on a fantastic speech and on securing this debate. The big Prides across the UK and across the world are important, but does he agree that it is vital to have Prides in towns and villages across the UK and the world? The small towns and villages are where the biggest challenges lie for LGBT people.

Peter Kyle: That is a welcome and important intervention. We have big Prides in London and in Brighton, which is the biggest in Europe, attracting over 300,000 people, and those big celebrations have played a key role in our communities for a long time. I was on the board of Brighton and Hove Pride for three years and saw what it took to organise the event. I am well aware of its contribution to our community year-round, distributing the surpluses that it makes in one weekend. However, it is amazing how many other smaller communities along the south coast of England have started their own Prides. Worthing has launched its Pride for the first time this year, and Eastbourne started its Pride last year. I hope that smaller communities will see the benefits of a locally rooted opportunity to celebrate diversity in their community and to allow LGBT people to come out and celebrate who they are as individuals. I grew up in Bognor Regis, a town on the south coast, and I would love the day to arrive on which Bognor has its Pride, which I would visit happily and proudly to represent the people of Hove and Portslade.

[Peter Kyle]

How things have changed. Everyone who attends and forms part of the crowd at a Pride does so for their own reasons. Many go to show support for friends or family or the LGBT community in general. We see lots of parents with young children sitting on their shoulders, waving the pride flag, and for them it is presumably a tool to introduce the next generation to the issues surrounding equality, sexuality and gender. For me, however, when I cast my eyes around the crowds of onlookers, I am always wondering how many people are going through the same turmoil I once did. If they notice me, my greatest hope is that they see a comfort and confidence in who I am today, including my sexuality, and that that in turn will ease their journey towards allowing others to get to know all of them, not just the bits that are not hidden. That is what we all aspire to as individuals, and this country should aspire to create the conditions in which that is possible and do what we can to get other countries to follow suit. Until that is achieved, days such as the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia will need to exist, and debates like this will remain as important as ever.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I have to introduce a five-minute limit, starting with Justine Greening.

3.37 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate, because the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia is such an important day for so many millions of people around the world. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for securing this debate and for giving a united House of Commons the chance to speak out about issues that matter to so many of us.

While we use this day to celebrate the progress that has been made in so many parts of the world, we should recognise that we still need to make a huge amount of progress—more so in some places than in others. In my time as Secretary of State for International Development, I had the chance to visit many countries where LGBT people simply do not have the same rights that we have here in the UK. We have to recognise that all countries are on a journey, and we should pay tribute to the many LGBT campaigners around the world who work in countries that have so much further to go than the UK. They often put their lives at risk in mounting such campaigns and being a voice for the people around them who suffer so much persecution.

Being LGBT is still a crime in many countries around the world, and people can end up in jail purely because of who they choose to love. Speaking out against that and being a voice today for some of those people is an important task for the House of Commons. We have a chance to stand up for millions of people who do not have a voice. I reiterate what the hon. Member for Hove said: it is exceptionally important that we use the Commonwealth network to drive change, particularly in those Commonwealth countries that have not moved forward since gaining independence. Yes, we were right to make that apology, but those countries now have the

chance and the space to make the changes we have made in the intervening years. I think they can make those changes, they should make those changes and they need to make those changes to decriminalise being LGBT. This is a historic time, and I want to see all Commonwealth countries grasp the opportunity to drive for LGBT equality.

We know that changing laws is crucial, and it is at the heart of how we move things forward in our country. Last year, when we were celebrating 50 years since the decriminalisation of homosexuality began, I had the chance to meet some of the amazing people who were there at the beginning of the campaign, many of them through no choice of their own—many had been prosecuted and therefore found themselves flung into a campaign that they had not particularly chosen. They did subsequent generations so much positive good by being prepared and having the courage to come forward and fight those campaigns, and we all benefit from the hard-won rights they won for the rest of us.

This is not just about changing laws; it is about changing attitudes, too. Laws are the beginning of how countries change, but they are by no means the whole picture. The work done by the Government Equalities Office in getting what I hope will be the biggest LGBT survey under way last year is crucial in allowing ourselves and our country to assess how much progress we have made and where we need to continue making progress. In a variety of areas, whether it is LGBT communities' experience of crime, health, education or other public attitudes, the results of the survey when they are finally published, which I am looking forward to, will give us a chance to take stock of where Britain has got to and, on the basis of that evidence, to talk about where the priorities need to be for the coming years.

There is no doubt that we can be proud of the laws this Parliament has passed, particularly in recent years, and, of course, particularly in relation to same-sex marriage.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): There is an element of deliberate intervention about this—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Please let us not intervene for the sake of it, because I am sure you will not want your time cut later, Mr Blunt.

Crispin Blunt: Please let me make my intervention, because I want to say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) that her words are important because of her leadership both in the Department for International Development and the Department for Education. All of us, and the wider community, owe her a debt. I remember hearing the news of her coming out at the 2016 Pride parade, and I remember how much pleasure that gave the world.

Justine Greening: I very much appreciate that intervention. We all go on a personal journey, alongside the journey of the countries we are part of, and I think I realised that I needed to be part of the solution. Nothing changes on its own, and I realised I could be a positive step on the road to giving other people the confidence to be clear about who they are, too. I felt that was important. I very much enjoyed going to the London Pride celebration last year, and I look forward to being there again this year and in coming years.

I briefly pay tribute to Wandsworth LGBT Forum, which works tirelessly locally, and I wrap up by saying that you cannot be at your best if you cannot be yourself. That is why this matters so much.

3.44 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow an excellent speech by the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), along with so many others, for securing this debate.

Like my hon. Friend, I want to pay tribute, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to the work of the Speaker on these issues. Who could have imagined just 10 or 15 years ago that a Speaker's crest would sit in the Speaker's apartment with the rainbow flag and with "All Are Equal" on the bottom of it? I say that just as Mr Speaker takes the Chair. That has sent out an incredibly strong message—not only in this Parliament, but to many Parliaments and countries around the world.

It is a particular pleasure to take part in this debate, both on a personal level, as an out gay MP and co-chair of the LGBT parliamentary Labour party—I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) on the Front Bench, and although my co-chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) could not be here today, I am sure she sends her strong wishes to this debate—and because of the fantastic work being done against homophobia, transphobia and biphobia in my constituency and in Wales by a range of fantastic organisations.

I particularly want to pay tribute to the work of Pride Cymru—to Lu Thomas and all her team, who do such a fantastic job, taking that event from strength to strength. This is now combined with the "Big Weekend" in Cardiff and it has become an inclusive, family-friendly, open event for all people, whether they are in the LGBT+ community or just allies, friends and neighbours.

I also pay tribute to the work of Pride Swansea. I was lucky enough to be able to go to the reinvigorated Pride Swansea parade the other week, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) and for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), and many others. It was a wonderful, happy and inclusive celebration of all that is good about equality in this country and standing up against the three evils we are discussing today.

It was absolutely right of the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), who spoke from the Scottish National party Front Bench, to make clear the importance of getting out to our smaller towns around the country. I am looking forward to going to a Monmouth young people's Pride event later this year. It is important that we support those groups and organisations in our smaller towns and communities up and down the country.

I pay tribute to organisations such as Stonewall Cymru that do such fantastic work, and to the Iris prize; we are delighted in Wales to host one of the leading independent LGBT+ film festivals every year. A few weeks ago, it was a particular pleasure to be there to see the Lily Summers award for LGBT+ activism being given to a good friend of mine, Lisa Power, one of the founders of Stonewall. Lily was a remarkable young trans woman in the Labour party in Wales who, sadly,

died at far too young an age. She made an incredible difference in her community and it was a real pleasure to see an award in her memory being awarded to someone such as Lisa, who has made so much difference in fighting against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia right from the early days and is continuing to do so to this day.

That brings me to the issue of trans rights. Although we have seen so much progress made on equality in this country, we have much, much more to do, particularly on the issues affecting the trans community. I have had the pleasure of meeting my local trans support group in Cardiff. Good work is being done by South Wales police to root out hate crime, including against the trans community, and I know that members of that community hugely appreciate that work.

I know this has been mentioned, but what a contrast we have seen between our UK armed forces' response to the issue of trans people serving in the armed forces and the response in America. Unfortunately, as we highlighted in the Home Affairs Committee just a few weeks ago, the debate sometimes leaves a significant amount to be desired, and an awful lot of hurt can be done to members of the trans community. I urge that all of that debate be conducted with respect and humanity, with everyone remembering that at the heart of this debate are individuals who have often gone through great hatred and hurt.

It is only right that we talk about the issues faced internationally. I have spoken in this place previously about Chechnya and LGBT rights in Russia, Africa and the middle east. Unfortunately, we have seen Beirut Pride being shut down and cancelled in recent weeks. This is being dealt with by the vice police and other bodies, which is completely unacceptable.

We have seen the Georgian activists having their international day, which we are celebrating today, being cancelled, and we have seen many, many examples of hatred against the trans, gay, lesbian and bi communities across Europe. However, there is much positive going on as well. We have seen a fantastic Pride event in Moldova in recent days, and I met fantastic LGBT activists from across the Commonwealth at an event in your house recently, Mr Speaker. They all set for us an example that there is hope that we can make a change and that we can fight for equality and against these three evils, in this world and in this country.

3.49 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow three excellent speeches, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing the debate.

It is a pleasure also to see the rainbow flag flying from Government buildings today. That is not a token; it sends a signal. I hope that the Minister will be able to ensure that when Pride week comes, the rainbow flag will fly from high commissions and embassies all over the world. Again, that would not be tokenism; it would send a real signal to a number of people who happen to be gay, particularly in Commonwealth countries and throughout the middle east, and who are living in repression and fear simply because they are gay. Please, let us see the rainbow flag flying proudly for that week from high commissions and embassies around the world.

[Mr Nigel Evans]

There is a big wedding on Saturday, and I wish Harry and Meghan incredibly well. I want to say to Harry and to Prince William that they have been amazing role models in promoting LGBT issues. They have been absolutely fantastic, and it is more role models that we need. Tom Daley has been a superb role model in the world of sport. I saw in one newspaper recently an article that implied that there was a premier league footballer who was bisexual but not out, and it seemed to be some sort of semi-scandal. The scandal is that in this day and age, in the 21st century, in 2018, anybody should fear coming out because they feel there would be catcalls from the stadiums or whatever. All I can say is that since I came out I have had the two best election results I have ever had. At the most recent election, I got more votes than I had ever had. I am not putting that down to the fact that I am gay, but it certainly has not done me any harm. That is the message that I wish to send out today.

Hannah Bardell: On the hon. Gentleman's point about sport, particularly football, does he agree that it is incumbent on those in senior positions in organisations such as the FA to send a positive message about what it would be like to come out and the support that people get? Unfortunately, that has not always been the case in recent times.

Mr Evans: Absolutely. During Pride week a lot of the premier league teams wear rainbow laces, and that is superb, but it would be fantastic if in the 21st century more footballers were able to come out as who they are. I attend a lot of conferences with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and I have great pride in telling people that we have more out gay MPs than any other Parliament in the world. That was not the case 20 years ago, and it may well be that football is 20 years behind the curve, but imagine the influence it would have throughout the world if some of the great footballers who are gay were able to come out openly and say that they were. They would be amazing role models.

In Parliament, we have Ministers, Secretaries of State and former Secretaries of State who have happily come out as gay and proved to be role models. The current Taoiseach of Ireland and Prime Ministers of Serbia and Luxembourg, and the former Prime Ministers of Belgium and Iceland are all gay. Again, they are sending a happy signal to the rest of the world that it is okay to be gay and that it is not going to hold back one's career.

I mentioned the royal wedding earlier. A billion people will tune in to watch that happy event, and I shall certainly watch it, but while I am watching, one thing will flash through my mind, which is that I am a Christian. Clearly, I am a second-class Christian but a first-class gay. Why? Because I would not be allowed to walk down the aisle with somebody I loved and get married in a church in England. My message to Justin Welby is that I understand that the Church in Africa and some other countries is not as progressive as we are, but he really needs to show leadership in our country to ensure that gay Christian people can get married and enjoy a big day, just as Harry and Meghan are going to do on Saturday.

Bob Stewart: I voted against the equal marriage Act, and I was wrong. I was wrong, because I have seen the joy that it has given to so many people. The established Church of our country should follow what this House has decided, and gay people should be allowed to marry in church.

Mr Evans: That is breaking news, and it is absolutely superb. My hon. and gallant Friend has just told us what his views were in the past and what they are today. If he can make that progression, I rather hope that the Archbishop of Canterbury is listening and that he, too, can make that sort of progression, so that Christians in this country can enjoy a big day just as Harry and Meghan will on Saturday.

We need to send a signal. In 72 countries, there are laws against being homosexual. I know that some of them are legacy laws from the United Kingdom, and at the Inter-Parliamentary Union, I have apologised for the fact that we bequeathed them those laws, but it does not mean that they need to keep them, because we have not. We have moved on, and I hope that they will be able to do so, too. There are 13 countries in which people can be executed for being homosexual, and two in which that currently happens—it is happening at the moment in Iran and parts of Somalia. It is horrific that the death penalty exists for simply being gay.

At conferences of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, we try to promote equality wherever we possibly can. At the last conference in St Petersburg, we put down a motion in one of the committees to say that, at the conference in Geneva, we would discuss homophobia and the fact that there are people who feel repressed simply because they have gay people living in their country. Just at the tail end, when we thought that we were going to get it on the agenda, an attack was sprung on us on the last day by countries mostly from the middle east to take it off the agenda. Uganda was also a prominent fighter against gay rights. The topic was therefore taken off the agenda for Geneva in March. We are now trying to put it back on the agenda for the meeting in October.

There were about 30 countries that voted against discussing gay issues. There was not going to be a resolution, so there would have been nothing for them to vote against. All they were doing was trying to stop Members of Parliament talking about gay issues that occur in their countries. China was one of the countries that tried to stop the discussions, as were Russia, most of the middle east and Uganda. I pay tribute to countries such as Belgium, Canada, Sweden, New Zealand—particularly the wonderful Labour MP Louisa Wall, who has promoted equal rights in New Zealand—Australia and South Africa. We were even supported by Angola and Malawi. That was a superb revelation for me.

All I can say in conclusion is that homophobia is illogical, it is a denial of human rights, it is dumb and it is time that we made it history.

3.57 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing this debate of huge importance, and I am honoured to take part in it. Last month we did indeed see the Commonwealth Heads of Government summit, which was a key opportunity to highlight and

advocate on behalf of LGBT people living oppressed false lives in fear, or in valiant criminal resistance in the 36 of the 53 countries in the Commonwealth in which homosexuality is illegal.

Those 36 Commonwealth countries are among many countries around the world where being LGBT is punishable—people are punished and made into criminals. They also suffer public beatings and enforced sterilisation. It is truly chilling that a person having sex with someone of the same sex can lead to their death in 10 countries around the world. We should remember that although we are in a certain position that the rest of world is not, such positions can be vulnerable.

LGBT people in those countries live with the daily risk of attacks, of rape and of murder. Let us not allow semantics to deceive us when we talk of homophobia, transphobia or biphobia. The word “phobia” means fear—a fear such as arachnophobia, agoraphobia or claustrophobia. The responsibility is on oneself to overcome that fear. What we are dealing with here is not fear but hate, where the responsibility is left to the victim to overcome the hateful effects.

According to the LGBT anti-violence group Galop, hate crimes against LGBT people in the UK rose by 147% in the three months following the Brexit vote. A report by Stonewall Cymru found that attacks on people in Wales had risen by nearly 82% in the five years up to 2017, and that 52% of trans people had suffered a hate crime. Before anyone celebrates that as a reporting success, I should add that Stonewall Cymru has also found that four out of five anti-LGBT attacks still go unreported.

While we can congratulate ourselves on the progress, albeit inconsistent, that we have made here in the UK, we cannot ignore the wider issue, which is that we are living in a time of increased bigotry. Difference is being seized on as a weapon of division, and unfettered hate speech is opening the way to a rise in violence and hate crime. We must not allow free speech to be taken hostage by those who would seek to divide and intimidate. A civilised society will be judged not just on how it treats the majority but on how it stands up for its minority groups and protects them when the tyranny of the majority threatens.

We are honoured to be elected representatives, but we must use our platform to speak up for the rights of all. We must not allow the rights of some in our society to be sidelined or turn a blind eye to oppression in action. Until we achieve a society in which all are respected and treated as equal, in which anyone can walk hand in hand with anyone else, in which being in a same-sex relationship is not a political act, and in which being a trans person of colour does not threaten someone's chances in life, there is still work to be done.

Human rights, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation or anything else, must continue to progress, and those who stand in the way must be held to account. That is our duty. Human beings are all different. Let us start with difference and move forward with acceptance.

4.1 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing this debate. I was pleased to support him in my capacity as chair of the all-party group on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights, which now has more

than 80 members from this House and the other place. It is timely that on International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia we are here talking about the importance of promoting LGBT rights.

We last had this debate—initiated again through the Backbench Business Committee, which I thank for allowing this one—on 26 October. I spoke then about the fact that we were living in two worlds: great progress was being made on LGBT rights in some countries, while in others we were, at best, standing still and, at worst, going backwards. It is important to understand the reason for that. In that debate, I pointed out that, in a short period—16 years—25 countries had passed same-sex marriage legislation. Since then, Australia has become the 26th, following—significantly—a referendum in which a large majority supported the legislation. In so many countries, then, there has been progress on same-sex marriage, yet in others there has been reversal. In Bermuda, where same-sex marriage was introduced under the auspices of its Supreme Court, it has now been reversed by democratic decision and populism in Bermuda. That is a warning to this place not to be complacent about LGBT rights or—for that matter—human rights; we must constantly guard against their reversal.

At the time, I raised the situation in Russia and urged the Government to press the Russian authorities to say what had happened to their investigation into the treatment of gay men in Chechnya, where there had been appalling brutality, torture, arbitrary detention and even killings. What has happened? Recently, the Russian Government flatly denied that their investigation had produced any results—they simply denied that what happened in Chechnya took place. There is a need, therefore, for scrutiny and continuing pressure on those countries to expose what is happening, and we have to be ready to raise these issues at the diplomatic level.

Stephen Doughty: I have heard at first hand testimony about Chechnya from activists here in this Parliament. Does the right hon. Gentleman also agree, however, that we need to look at the situation in Northern Ireland? It is obviously not comparable to Chechnya, but does he welcome the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom?

Nick Herbert: Yes, I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I am just coming to that point.

Still on the global front, there are other countries where the situation is going backwards. Under state auspices in Indonesia, there are calls for criminalisation and for cures for homosexuality, and raids on private spaces. This is all making public health outreach more difficult, which is interfering with HIV/AIDS programmes. That is of great concern to those campaigning for the relief of HIV infections. In fact, the infection rate in Indonesia has increased fivefold over the past decade. The authorities and parliamentarians in Jakarta are now considering a Bill to criminalise same-sex conduct. I could go on with my list. I could talk about what is happening in China or in Zambia. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), should he be called to speak, will talk about what has been happening in Lebanon.

[Nick Herbert]

Let us try to look on the bright side. The Government should be commended for the stance that they have taken on these issues. Only recently, the Prime Minister took a very strong stance at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. We still have a situation whereby too many Commonwealth countries—the majority—criminalise homosexual conduct, therefore covering a majority of the population of Commonwealth citizens. The apology that the Prime Minister offered, as well as the willingness to work towards decriminalisation, made a powerful statement.

The Government can do so much. They need to be cognisant of the importance of maintaining pressure. I therefore welcome what the Foreign Secretary said today, when he tweeted:

“Standing up for human rights, including LGBT rights, is an integral part of @foreignoffice work. Societies where people live freely attract world-class talent, business investment & are more stable and prosperous.”

I welcome the work of the Foreign Office in supporting LGBT groups through our diplomatic missions, and through our embassies and high commissions on the ground. Many of our ambassadors and high commissioners do strong work in this area. We need to see more consistency, with more embassies and high commissions offering the support that the best do. That is the message that we should carry to the Foreign Office.

The Government need to be aware that there are domestic issues still to resolve in this country. This is not all about what other countries should do. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) mentioned Northern Ireland. It is almost certainly the will of this House that the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) (Northern Ireland) (No.2) Bill passes, and it should be allowed to do so. I understand that it is not the Government who are standing in its way. Hate crime is still a problem in this country, indeed it is increasing, and there are still issues for LGBT asylum seekers. Above all, there are issues for trans people; the consultation on reforming the Gender Recognition Act 2004 should proceed. These are important issues. We have made enormous progress in this country, but there is still work to do.

4.7 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow so many fantastic speeches and, indeed, a privilege to speak in this debate on International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing the debate, and thank the Backbench Business Committee for supporting it.

Hon. Members have already reflected on and spoken powerfully of the changes that they have seen over their lifetimes. It is horrifying to think that when I was born in 1978 consensual homosexual acts between adults were still three years away from being decriminalised in Scotland. It is a tragedy to think about how many lives were destroyed by those pernicious criminal laws.

After two steps forward, we took one step back, as decriminalisation was followed by the equally disgraceful piece of legislation that became known as section 28—legislation that undoubtedly prevented schools from

being the inclusive and supportive environments that they should have been. Its repeal in 2000 was a gutsy move by the Labour and Liberal Democrat Scottish Executive of the time, against a background of a vicious campaign of misinformation and prejudice that barely left the front pages of the Scottish newspapers for month after month. Thankfully, enhancement and equalisation of civil rights in other fields followed, culminating in equal marriage measures in Holyrood and here in Westminster, after what I think could be described as a significantly more uplifting debate.

I want to finish my progress report by paying tribute to my former colleague and neighbouring MP for East Dunbartonshire, John Nicolson, who introduced his “Turing Bill”—the Sexual Offences (Pardons Etc.) Bill—as a private Member’s Bill in the last Parliament. Although it sadly did not make it on to the statute book, it clearly provoked Governments here and in Scotland into passing their own legislation to pardon those convicted of breaching the pernicious old laws of the past and into righting some of the most terrible injustices.

It is fantastic that Scotland and the UK are regularly listed near the top of the rankings of the best European country for LGBTI equality. It is appropriate that we pay tribute to the activists and campaigners—there are too many to name—who have put themselves on the line in securing the rights and freedoms that we enjoy today. But as other hon. Members have said, there is no room for complacency, and nobody is saying that the job is finished. Some have highlighted the progress that we still need to make on transgender rights. I welcome the work undertaken by the Scottish Government to review and improve the Gender Recognition Act. I very much want to see the same thing happen here, and quickly.

It is fair to say that the effect of section 28 still seems to linger. Making schools a supportive environment for LGBT pupils is not just a matter of repealing that vicious legislation; it is also about positively ensuring that support and inclusive education are genuinely available. I want to pay a huge tribute to two of my constituents, Jordan Daly and Liam Stevenson, for the outstanding work they have done through their Time for Inclusive Education—TIE—campaign, which I know many Members across the House are strong supporters of. I hope that their hard work will help to ensure that, in future, schools can be more fully supportive and inclusive of LGBT pupils in a way that they were prevented from being in the past.

Another sphere that has not always provided a welcoming place for LGBT people is the world of sport. My impression is that sport in Scotland, and particularly football, has previously lagged somewhat behind the efforts to tackle homophobia in England. There has thankfully been some recent positive progress, with the development of the Scottish LGBT sports charter and the equality standard. It was encouraging to see some of the cautiously optimistic submissions to the recent Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee inquiry on that subject.

In discussing sport, it would be remiss of me not to highlight the volunteers and clubs that have gone out of their way to promote sporting participation among the LGBT community. In the UK, for example, we have various leagues, including a nationwide Gay Football Supporters’ Network league, that provide a safe space

for hundreds—in fact, probably thousands—of football enthusiasts who happen to be LGBT or I. It is something that has been hugely important for me, and I have enjoyed being part of that for the last eight or nine years through Edinburgh's Hots Scots football club. I very much look forward to joining them and thousands of other competitors this summer in the 10th Gay games in Paris, where we will compete against teams from around the globe.

There is much to celebrate across the UK, but there are also serious challenges. It is fair to say that the outlook for many members of our community around the world is often far bleaker. On the theme of sport, Russia will of course be hosting an even more significant sporting event this summer; yet, as the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) pointed out, it is among countries that have an appalling recent record on LGBTI rights. The UK Government have a commendable record on making representations to other Governments on LGBTI rights and the repeal of discriminatory laws, but diplomacy, as we heard, is just one side of the coin. Hearts and minds need to be changed more generally, and that is an even bigger challenge.

If time permitted, I would highlight the fantastic work of Pride House International, which made a massive contribution to challenging homophobia and discrimination among Commonwealth countries by hosting an event at the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth games. I understand that when in Russia it will be present at a World cup for the first time. Obviously, it will not have Russian Government support, so if there were any opportunity for UK Government support, FA support or FIFA support, that would be magnificent.

4.12 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I would like to begin by echoing Members' comments about the significance of today's debate, on International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing the debate.

I do not think I have spoken in my three years in the House about these rights, but let me say at the outset that, as a lawyer, I believe that it is absolutely integral in the rule of law to have equality and diversity recognised. It is only by having those values recognised that the rule of law is sacrosanct.

I am hugely proud that the UK is a world leader in transgender rights and LGBT equality. If we are to achieve social and societal progress abroad, we must continue to ensure that we set an example here in the House of Commons and across the country. I would like to remind the House of the promising and progressive legislation passed under David Cameron's premiership in the 2010 Parliament, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, which gave many people the right to marry those who mean most to them. That was perhaps the moment that I became most aware of the importance of this issue. I married in 2003, and I do not know what it would be like not to have been able to marry the person you love.

I am delighted to say that four organisations in my constituency—Leicestershire police, Conservative-led Leicestershire County Council, the University of Leicester and De Montfort University, just outside my patch—are

included in Stonewall's top 100 employers. That is a tremendous achievement for Leicester and Leicestershire, and it puts them both proudly at the forefront of inclusivity and equality. For almost 30 years, Stonewall has been a trailblazer in promoting equality and acceptance for concerns affecting the LGBT community. I pay tribute to it for that. Perhaps it did not often happen in the past that Conservative MPs paid tribute to Stonewall. Perhaps we are rectifying that mistake today; at least I hope to be rectifying it today.

Equality and acceptance for the LGBT community is not only enshrined in laws made in this place or in our devolved Parliaments and Assemblies—it is also, perhaps more importantly, demonstrated in the everyday actions we all take in helping to create an inclusive and accepting environment for everyone. However, it is important to recognise that, as with most matters, there is always more to be done.

Individuals who are, or are perceived to be, LGBT are disproportionately affected by bullying. That is simply not acceptable in this day and age. I should like to cite a case of homophobic abuse at a Leicester City football match in September last year, where a Leicester City fan shouted an offensive term at Brighton supporters. Brighton is a city known nationally and proudly for its large LGBT community. This offensive behaviour, I am pleased to inform the House, was swiftly condemned by both clubs and by the supporters group of Leicester City—a club that proudly promotes inclusivity and equality for all supporters. The incident was dealt with swiftly by Leicestershire police, who, as I mentioned, are proudly included in Stonewall's top 100 employers, and are especially adept at dealing with offences of this nature. That recent incident is sadly just one of many homophobic, transphobic or biphobic instances that the LGBT community contend with on a day-to-day basis. I repeat that this is simply unacceptable in this day and age—in fact, at any time.

Equality and inclusivity are the bedrocks of modern democracies. These principles are enshrined in all of us at birth, and we should seek to ensure that they are recognised among all of us in society. I am therefore delighted to join colleagues in all parts of the House in supporting today's International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia.

4.17 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I add my congratulations and tribute to the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing this debate. This is an unusual situation because it is an important debate to have, and yet one that we probably all wish was not necessary. My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), who is no longer in her place, talked about many countries being on a journey. Regardless of the progress that we have made in this country and what we might think of that progress, and while we have travelled further than many countries, we have not yet completed our journey.

One of the things about being a Liberal is that when it comes to protecting and standing up for LGBTI rights, one has a lot to live up to. As far back as 1975, we committed to a gay rights policy with a resolution in favour of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality's proposed law reform Bill. What sticks out for me about that is that it was 1975—just over 40 years ago. As my

[Christine Jardine]

hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) said, it is unimaginable that it was only 40 years ago that we were first talking of a campaign about full equality for homosexuals and equalising the age of consent for gay sex. If we fast-forward 40 years, at our 2015 conference we overwhelmingly opposed conversion therapy for all LGBT+ people—imagine that in 2015. We have travelled a considerable way, but we should not pat ourselves on the back quite yet, because we have a long way to go.

One of the most significant things for me—so far—was a statement made by Nick Clegg before the 2010 general election. When speaking about equal marriage, he said simply:

“All couples”—

I emphasise, all couples—

“should be able to make that commitment to one another”,

and now they can. Under the equal marriage legislation championed by Lynne Featherstone, of which I am particularly proud, we now live in a society where everyone is able to love equally.

I remember being asked just before the Scottish elections in 2011 whether I would support equal marriage. To me, that was a ridiculous question. What struck me was that if I had two children, one of whom was gay while the other was not, would I not want them to have the same rights, the same protection and the same respect from the law? What a ludicrous question.

Only today, my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) has raised the issue of not being able to get married in church. I would like to make him an offer. *[Interruption.]* Not that sort of offer. One of my friends is a Church of Scotland minister, who is gay. If I had a word with him, I am sure that he would be more than happy to oblige when it came to the ceremony.

As I say, we have come a long way, but not as far as we should have done. At the moment, we are increasingly hearing about transphobia. Although the Equality Act 2010 protects trans people from discrimination—regardless of whether they have changed their birth certificate—and we have seen great strides in rights, we cannot rest until LGBT+ people across the globe are able to live freely, without fear of discrimination, marginalisation or criminalisation.

That is so even here in the UK where, as I have said, in recent months the trans community has faced a barrage of transphobia—denigrating their identities, dismissing their rights and defying the tolerance we cherish in this country. Imagine being a teenager who is facing all that: coming to a realisation about their sexuality or their gender identification, and seeing that denigrated every day in the media. It must be terrifying. It is not only terrifying and unacceptable, but dangerous, because 45% of trans school pupils in the UK report attempting suicide, which is unacceptable. The world is a difficult enough place for our teenagers without adding extra problems.

There is a list—a long list—of things that we still have to do in this country. With an eye to the time, I will not list them, but the biggest thing we have to do is to keep working on our tolerance. We must keep looking at where we can improve the situation—looking at every little thing, as well as the big things—to ensure that all our children live in a country where they feel equal.

4.22 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): It is a delight to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine). Indeed, I am happy to call her my hon. Friend, as she was so generous in using that term for Conservative colleagues. That brings back memories of the days of the coalition, when we had a Liberal-Conservative Government with a majority of 80—a Government who were able to deliver very significant advances on these issues.

My party has proudly continued with those advances, and last year the Government committed to launching a consultation on reforming the Gender Recognition Act 2004, as recommended by the Women and Equality Committee's 2016 transgender equality inquiry. Indeed, earlier today, the Minister for Women and Equalities recommitted to launching this consultation—soon. In the hands of the civil service, “soon” is a somewhat elastic concept, as the Minister will know. I would be grateful to her if she did a little better than that in replying to this debate, because every delay means people not being able to exercise the rights and choices they would ideally like to make.

The Gender Recognition Act enabled trans people, for the first time, to have their gender identity recognised under the law, which in 2004 was a very significant step forward for trans equality. Today, however, the Act is outdated and in urgent need of reform, and I commend the Government's commitment to de-medicalise and streamline the process of legal gender recognition.

In its present form, the Act treats being trans as a mental illness by requiring applicants to have a psychiatric diagnosis of gender dysphoria, which is all too similar to what was thought about being gay and bi in the not too distant past. It also requires applicants to go through an intrusive and bureaucratic process to have their gender legally recognised, and it makes no provision whatsoever for non-binary people—those who do not identify as male or female—to have their gender legally recognised. I look forward to that consultation being comprehensive and including questions on non-binary recognition. That is vital so that we can hold a debate on reform that is based on facts and evidence.

Since the Government announcement last year, a small but vocal minority of people have run a campaign of misinformation and transphobia in the media and online in an attempt to derail reform. Attitudes have been expressed about trans people that echo the unhappy ignorance about lesbian, gay and bi people that helped to allow section 28 to be passed into law in this House 30 years ago next week. The Scottish Government have already consulted on their proposed reforms, including plans to introduce a process on the principle of self-declaration, and to bring Scotland into line with best practice in countries such as the Republic of Ireland, Denmark and Malta. Now we must do the same, and we ought to do it now—I look forward to hearing the timetable. In recent years we have rightly prided ourselves as a beacon of LGBT equality, but we must now take the opportunity to ensure that all trans and non-binary people are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve, and reinstate our position as leaders of LGBT equality in the world.

Nick Herbert: Before my hon. Friend turns to international issues, will he pay tribute to the many LGBT non-governmental organisations that work so

tirelessly in this area, particularly Stonewall and the Kaleidoscope Trust, to which I know my hon. Friend—and you, Mr Speaker—have given particular and personal support?

Crispin Blunt: I am grateful for that intervention because it has been one of the delights of my relationship with you, Mr Speaker, that we have been able to work closely together on these matters over the past five or six years.

We continue to show leadership in this area. At the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting the Prime Minister made a statement about British policy on this issue, and outlined the assistance we are prepared to give to help countries that were unlucky enough to inherit our unhappy laws in this area, which was extremely welcome. However, if we look around the world we see that, progress is not universal and consistent, as it has been in the United Kingdom. On 10 July 2018 the British Government will host the Western Balkans Summit in London, but LGBT issues are not on the agenda, and so far, LGBT organisations have not been invited to participate in the civil society forum, or other forums. In preparation for EU accession, many countries have formally brought many of their laws into line. However, it is not much good for an LGBT activist or group in that country if the law is all right, but nobody is doing anything to change attitudes in society, or to oversee and ensure that the police and other public authorities do what they are supposed to do to uphold the rights that people may have technically but not necessarily in practice.

Mr Nigel Evans: Since we are talking about the international community, let me correct something I said earlier. I said that Iran and parts of Somalia have executed people for being gay, but it is actually Iran and Saudi Arabia. Does my hon. Friend agree that the prospect of people being executed simply because of their sexuality is something that we in this House should fight against?

Crispin Blunt: In far too many jurisdictions the death penalty remains in place. Parts of Nigeria are covered by such a jurisdiction, but there are also parts where someone can cheerfully get lynched. And it is not just Nigeria; this is an incredibly important issue for many people who continue to live in terror around the world. That is why I am delighted that we have had the opportunity to raise this issue again, having had a debate on international LGBT rights last October.

In the time remaining I will reflect on those parts of the world where we are not making progress. Only this week—on Monday night—the organiser of Lebanon Pride was arrested in Lebanon. He spent 12 hours under arrest, and was released only if he signed a declaration to say that he would cancel the rest of the events that he was organising for Lebanon Pride. He had already ensured that there would not be a Pride parade in Beirut in 2018, because the 2017 Pride parade had been cancelled after threats of violence against it by Islamist groups. I hope the Minister will tell us that we will take this up with the Lebanese authorities. We need to support people in this position. The circumstances facing activists in parts of the middle east mean that they need to be incredibly courageous, so I hope the Minister can give me that reassurance.

Finally, I want to turn to the unhappy example of Turkey. We have identified ourselves as fourth in the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's European report. Turkey is almost at the bottom with only nine indicators—Malta is at the top with 91—yet we have just entertained President Erdoğan here on a state visit to the United Kingdom. Can the Minister tell us if these issues were raised with the Turkish President?

4.30 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) and I associate myself with everything that has been said in the debate by hon. Members. As a British citizen and a gay man, I am very aware of the level of equality that I can enjoy in this country. I would like to put on record my profound thanks to all parliamentarians, of whichever party, who have helped to bring that about in the UK since the 1950s.

If we are to be a beacon of respect for human rights to the rest of the world, we have a duty to support those people who are not British citizens but who have fled from their country of origin because of threats to their human rights. Even in those countries where capital punishment may not be the official sanction for being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered, unofficial sanctions are imposed by other members of the society, including the police forces that are meant to protect citizens, making people pariahs, beating them up and often killing them.

This country has a proud history of providing asylum for people fleeing political oppression, but I suggest our willingness to protect people fleeing oppression on every one of the protected characteristics should be every bit as firm as it was for those fleeing communism or fascism. About 6% of asylum claims in this country are made on the basis of sexual orientation, but only a quarter are granted compared with a third of other claims. I would like the Government to review the quality of decision taking in respect of LGBTI asylum claims. The stated policies for determining whether an asylum seeker should be granted leave to remain are relatively sympathetic, but the implementation of those policies sees LGBTI asylum seekers all too frequently detained and their LGBTI status questioned beyond all reasonable levels of evidence. In far too many cases, leave to remain is refused and they are returned to the dangerous situations from which they have fled.

Even if asylum seekers are not repatriated, the detention regime is not LGBTI friendly. People in asylum accommodation are normally required to share rooms. In many cases, this has led to bullying, harassment, physical violence and sexual assault not just from other detainees, but even, in some cases, from detention centre staff. I urge the Government to consider detaining far fewer LGBTI asylum seekers, and at the very least ensuring they are offered safe, self-contained accommodation if they are detained.

There is a serious issue about the trust immigrants can have in the system when they are the victims of crime, in particular sexual crimes and human trafficking. Far too often, migrants are too afraid of repatriation to be willing to use the law to escape from exploitation.

[Sandy Martin]

I believe there should be a default expectation that all those fleeing oppression on the grounds of one of the protected characteristics, whether race, religion, disability or sexual orientation, should be protected in this country. I believe that if our country could give that assurance to individuals from countries such as Afghanistan, Nigeria and Iraq, it would strengthen our ability to persuade those countries to protect their own citizens.

4.34 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I was proud to be elected last year, as an openly gay man, and in most respects in this country, for LGB people we have achieved legal equality—except, of course, in Northern Ireland, which other Members have mentioned. I am protected against discrimination in most areas of life. I can marry whomever I want to, if anyone would want to marry me, of course—applications on a postcard. I can date a person in the style that I want, including online, and of course, consensually I can sleep with who I want without fear of persecution.

However, the same cannot be said in many other parts of the world. One of my first trips as an MP was to Uganda. I met some activists there who have experienced their friends being murdered and a clampdown on their ability to associate with one another. That is the same in many Commonwealth countries, where people are legally persecuted, and that is of course not right.

Nick Herbert: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, just this morning, the offices of Sexual Minorities Uganda were raided by the authorities at the instigation of the Ugandan Government in Kampala, breaking up a meeting that it was holding to celebrate “IDAHO” Day? The meeting included diplomatic representatives from a number of countries, including, I understand, the United Kingdom.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: That is disgraceful. I was in those offices only a few months ago and I hope that the Government will raise this with the Ugandan Government. I hope that if the Ugandan Government keep clamping down, we offer space in our embassy compound for those meetings to continue, as I know other European embassies have done.

Before I finish, I want to touch on the fact that we should not be complacent here in the UK. We must make sure we understand that discrimination and hate crime go on here too. In Brighton we have a fantastic LGBT safety forum, but it reports that the number of homophobic and transphobic attacks has gone up. My colleague who stood in Worthing West at the last election, Sophie Cook, a trans woman, faced numerous instances of assault and abuse. I want to read one or two of the tweets that she gets. For example, a tweet about her standing said:

“Its a trannyfest. Welcome to tranny #Labour.”

Also, “Tranny Corbyn. This is what Britain has come to”—she receives hundreds and hundreds of those kinds of tweet every single week. That is unacceptable. It is unacceptable that we have not had an openly trans person here. We have 300,000 trans people in Britain, by many accounts, and we need to do better on representation in this Parliament. We have a great gay Parliament. Let us move forward to combat transphobia and have a more trans-friendly Parliament as well.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his succinctness. I think that is respected, as well as the power of what he said.

4.37 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to be summing up for the Scottish National party on this extremely important day against homophobia, transphobia and biphobia. I again pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), who opened with comments by Bill Clinton. In return, I want to quote his wife, Hillary, who I hold in great esteem in many regards. She said that

“gay people are born into and belong to every society in the world. They are all ages, all races, all faiths; they are doctors and teachers, farmers and bankers, soldiers and athletes; and whether we know it, or whether we acknowledge it, they are our family, our friends, and our neighbors. Being gay is not a Western invention; it is a human reality.”

I think that sums it up, Mr Speaker. I pay tribute to what you and your staff have done in this place. It is great to see the range of rainbows across the Chamber and the House today. I am working my way through the rainbow with my hair colour. Today is a blue day, which does not in any way reflect how I am feeling.

I will try to cover some of the excellent contributions that we have heard. We had so many. I will start by mentioning the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts)—I apologise if I have not pronounced her constituency well—who made some excellent comments. She spoke particularly about the attacks on LGBT people abroad.

I was in Malawi recently and met a number of trans activists. I have to say, their stories were heartbreaking—stories of being attacked in their workplace. Laurence, whom I met, was told by the police to go home and dress as the right gender, and then to come back. Trans people are simply not recognised. Malawi has come a long way—it is an incredible country, with which the nations of the United Kingdom have great ties—but it still has a long way to go.

People ask whether we still need awareness days and campaign days. I think that the comments that have been made on both sides of the House today have reminded us of why we absolutely do. In a report published earlier this year, Stonewall said:

“Trans students experience harassment and discrimination at university...More than a third of trans university students (36 per cent) have experienced negative comments or conduct from staff in the last year.”

I find that utterly astonishing. It is something that we must challenge and change throughout the UK. As we heard from the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), 45% of trans teenagers have attempted suicide. That is staggering. It is, I suppose, ironic—and fitting, in some ways—that this is also mental health awareness week, because, as we know, many members of the LGBT community suffer from mental health issues.

When the Scottish Government legislated for equal marriage in Scotland in 2014, that was a landmark moment. I was not out at that point, but I remember watching the coverage. In particular, I remember Tom French, who is now one of our brilliant press officers but who then worked for an LGBT youth organisation in Scotland, and who was a leading light in the campaign. Until I came out in 2015, that moment in 2014 helped

me to believe that perhaps one day it would be OK to be gay. Being elected and coming to this place helped me to move forward in my journey. Many other Members have spoken very movingly about their own personal journeys and the impact that this had on them.

As I said earlier, it is mental health awareness week. I must say, as someone who suffers from anxiety, that taking so long to come out had a huge impact on my mental health. The grey cloud of anxiety was never far away. Coming out has helped me to tackle that and get over it, but I think it important for us to recognise that many young people in particular, throughout the UK and beyond, suffer serious mental health problems as a result of being discriminated against.

I pay tribute to the Glitter Cannons in my constituency. We are celebrating our fourth West Lothian Pride event this year. When I was growing up in West Lothian, I could not have imagined a Pride celebration. Local Pride celebrations are hugely important to young people and families, because they have become very much family celebrations. We see people of all generations there, including children.

Last summer, I worked with the Victoria Derbyshire programme, doing a piece about the journey we have been on across the UK. I thank all the Members who took part in the programme. I will not name them all, because I cannot remember all their constituencies off the top of my head, but many Members spoke, and a couple of them were speaking for the first time about coming out. The programme tracked the changes in society through their personal experiences.

I pay particular tribute to people such as Lord Smith—Chris Smith. It is on their shoulders that we stand. People like me have been able to come out relatively easily, but for them it was hugely difficult and challenging. We must also remember—I think that this has been said by other Members—that when we change legislation, we do not necessarily change culture. It will take a major and concerted effort to roll back the discriminatory culture and atmosphere that was created in England by legislation such as section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 and section 2A of the Local Government Act 1986, which section 28 inserted.

In Scotland, we have been working closely on that. My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) mentioned the TIE—Time for Inclusive Education—campaign, and I pay tribute to its excellent work. Our Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, is doing a huge amount—as, I know, are the UK Government, including the Minister—to wipe away the effects of the 1988 legislation, which banned the supposed promotion of homosexuality and “the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.”

That language, and that legislation, shames us all. It was a dark mark on this Parliament. However, working together across parties, and across the UK and beyond, we can change the culture and the language, and make the future better for people throughout the UK and throughout the world.

4.44 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): It is not often that we can rise to our feet and say that we agree with absolutely everything that has been said from both sides of the House, but that is the case in this debate.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing this debate and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it. For #IDAHOBIT2018, the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, this year’s global theme is alliances for solidarity. The organisation says:

“No battle can be won in isolation. We all need to keep strengthening alliances, especially when we need to ensure safety, fight violence, lobby for legal change and/or campaign to change hearts and minds.”

Nobody loves a celebration more than I do, but as we celebrate we must recognise not just how far we have come, but how far we have yet to go. As a proud ally of the LGBT+ community, I ask the Minister this: when will she start the Gender Recognition Act consultation? Just do it; stop kicking the can down the road. Start the consultation.

There has undoubtedly been progress in the last century for LGBT+ people worldwide, but there remain discrepancies in rights globally, as we have heard today. The Government should note that over the past four years the UK has fallen from being the leading country for LGBT+ equality in Europe to fourth place, which is not good enough. The Government’s delay on the GRA consultation has created a hostile environment for the LGBT+ community. Over the past 12 months LGBT+ people have experienced increasing levels of hostility, hate crime and discrimination and been affected by the cuts to specialist services.

As we have heard, including from the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), some of the language used, especially about trans issues, is reminiscent of the language used in defence of section 28 decades ago. On some social media sites there is talk of reintroducing section 28 for trans people; we must not let that happen. Next week marks 30 years since that vicious provision was introduced by a Conservative Government, and it took 15 years of grassroots campaigning and a Labour Government before it was repealed in 2003. We must not go backwards. We must support change and get our domestic laws in order so that we can push globally to change the world for the better.

The last Labour Government did more than any other Government in British history to advance LGBT+ equality, and the next Labour Government will do even more. We will accelerate that work, show solidarity with the struggles for LGBT+ equality around the world and pressure Governments to enshrine these fundamental human rights.

I must say that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) might go viral, not because of his speech but because of the intervention on him by the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who said he was wrong to vote against same-sex marriage and he has seen the joy it has brought to people. That is the whole point: fighting for somebody else’s rights does not in any way diminish our own rights. The more we can get that across around the world, the better.

As I always say, the Government are welcome to steal the Labour party’s ideas. We have loads of them; we will give the Government loads and create even more, and we will progress the rights of everybody around the world, especially the LGBT+ community. The Labour party recently set up a Labour LGBTQ+ staff network to champion LGBTQ+ staff, ensure fair representation at all levels of the organisation and make Labour one of

[Dawn Butler]

the most attractive and welcoming workplaces for LGBTQ+ people. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), co-chair of the LGBT+ parliamentary Labour party group, for keeping us moving forward on the issue and making sure we are always ahead of the game.

As a country, we need a Government who will take action, not just make announcements. Currently we have a lot of PR but not much substance. I want to know when we are going to see the results of the LGBT survey that started last year; let us see the results so we can work together to move things forward and understand the lived experiences of the LGBT+ community.

I want the Minister to get to her feet and prove me wrong. I want her to say, “No, we’re doing lots of things. We’re going to start the GRA consultation tomorrow. We’ll publish the findings of the Government’s LGBT survey tomorrow.” I want all that to happen. I do not want to argue about this, I just want to move us forward.

When the Minister gets to her feet, it would also be nice if she could update the House on the UK’s commitment as Commonwealth chair for the next two years. It is important that we know what action the UK Government are taking to advance equality and human rights for LGBT+ people in the Commonwealth, bearing in mind that Commonwealth countries’ laws were put in place by the UK during its colonial years, as the Prime Minister has admitted. I take this opportunity to congratulate the Kaleidoscope Trust, which hosted the participation at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting of the largest ever delegation of LGBT+ activists.

I also want to thank the House of Lords, which voted last week to keep a key EU human rights charter as part of British law. Its absence could have seen the destruction of people’s rights, so I thank the House of Lords for doing that. As I continue to work with Pride, Black Pride, Stonewall, the British LGBT awards, the European diversity awards, GLAD—GLBTQ Legal Advocates and Defenders—and all the other LGBT+ organisations, I hope that the Government will do the same so that we can continue to move forward.

4.51 pm

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): Please will colleagues forgive me if I do not have time to refer to every single speech? This has been an incredibly powerful debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing it. The International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia is such an important date in our calendar, and I am glad that we are marking it with a debate in the House today. We have heard a series of powerful speeches from Members on both sides of the House, and I pay tribute to everyone who has contributed. The hon. Gentleman made a compelling speech, not just about winning rights but about the need to maintain, protect and nurture them once they have been won. He gave a very personal account of watching the Pride march in Brighton, hidden in the crowds before he had come out, and told us that his Pride journey over the years has meant that when he marches now he positively wants people to stare at him and pay attention to him.

I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), who has done so much, both personally and professionally, in this arena. Everyone across the House recognises the contribution that she has made. I was struck by the last line of her speech, when she said that “you cannot be at your best if you cannot be yourself”. To me, that sums up the important nature of this debate. I should also like to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), who touched on the mental health aspect of the debate. That is something that we should very much bear in mind. Indeed, it will continue to be borne in mind as we go through the programme of work that we have planned.

This debate has touched on a wide range of LGBT issues, and I want to give the hon. Member for Hove time to respond at the end. We have touched on domestic and international aspects of the issue. At the outset, it is worth reflecting on how far we have come domestically since the decriminalisation of homosexuality half a century ago. From the equalisation of the age of consent to the introduction of same-sex marriage, successive Governments have made significant progress in advancing equality for LGBT people, who now enjoy the right to marry, to start a family and to change their legal gender to match their identity. As a result, the UK is recognised globally as a world leader on LGBT rights. We can all be proud of that record, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) and the hon. Members for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) said. However, they also said that we must not be complacent. As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), Australia has recently voted to introduce equal marriage but, sadly, Bermuda has gone back on its legislation in that regard.

I have also listened to the concerns raised about the situation in Northern Ireland. Everyone in the House knows that it is a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive, but I am sure that there is impatience in this House on that matter. This morning, in Women and Equalities questions, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities talked about her determination to tackle these issues, and we are listening very carefully to that particular aspect of the LGBT debate.

In her first speech on the steps of Downing Street, the Prime Minister was clear that this Government are committed to tackling burning injustices. No one should be held back by their sexual orientation or their gender identity. I wish to take a moment to address a couple of the points that have been raised today, the first of which is on the LGBT survey. Last July, the Government launched a national LGBT survey to help us understand the experiences of LGBT people living in the UK. The response was unprecedented. We had the largest response ever in the world to a survey conducted to date, with more than 108,000 people participating. By definition, the survey marks a vital addition to the evidence base, and it will underpin the Government’s LGBT policy in the future. The results will be published in the next few weeks, and I look forward not only to the publication of those results but to a comprehensive LGBT action plan. That will set out the steps that we are taking in response to the survey findings, and a substantial package is being prepared; we are looking at Government services and considering how they can be improved.

The Gender Recognition Act 2004 has also been mentioned. Many trans people, including respondents to the LGBT survey, are clear that the process as it is now is not working for them. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) has canvassed me personally on that point at great length. I was delighted to go to an event in your house on Tuesday, Mr Speaker, which the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee hosted, with your permission and concerted support, although that you were in the Chair in the Chamber. I found it very interesting, and I was concerned to hear some of the issues raised by guests at that event. We have engaged constructively with a wide range of organisations to understand their views. We are analysing the responses of trans people in the LGBT survey, and we are aiming to launch the consultation before the summer recess. I hope that answers the questions put by various colleagues from throughout the House.

The Government recognise that conversations about transgender equality can elicit a wide range of views. Sometimes they stray into abuse and intimidation, and that is unacceptable. As hon. Members throughout the House, including the hon. Members for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) have explained, it must stop.

I turn now to schools, because, sadly, abuse and intimidation are not confined to the adult world. We know that studies such as the Stonewall school report have shown a decrease in bullying towards LGBT people in recent years, but reported rates are still too high. We want our schools to be inclusive, which is why we are funding a £3 million programme to tackle bullying.

Internationally, the UK is doing a great deal. If I may, I will write to hon. Members who have raised concerns about particular countries. Of course, the Prime Minister gave her commitment at the Commonwealth summit last month when she apologised for the UK's role in the past and outlined her determination to help countries update their law and reflect the progress we have made in this country on this important issue of the rights of LGBT people.

4.58 pm

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to all Members who have spoken today. The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) summed up the objective we are trying to

achieve when she said, “you cannot be at your best if you cannot be yourself.” Ensuring that people can be their best is what we are all trying to achieve in this Parliament, in the country and further afield.

There was a wonderful moment of drama, humanity and emotion in our debate, and it came from the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). Being a gay man, I am partial to a bit of drama and emotion, and it came from the most unexpected source today. He admitted that he had got it wrong in the past, which is a brave thing for any politician to stand up and say. He did a second brave thing by standing up and saying not only that he got it wrong last time, but that he wants a big positive change in the future. That means he has learned from the past. That is an attribute for which we are all very grateful.

We heard a lot of testimonies to you, Mr Speaker, before you arrived in the Chair. I expressed my view that this Chamber can be a hostile place to work but that, as a gay person, I have never in my three years here experienced any hint of homophobia. That is a testament to you and your leadership in this Chamber. If other employers showed the determination that you have, a lot of other people in other workplaces would enjoy the freedoms that we express here daily. We are very grateful for that.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he said and the way in which he said it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the international day against homophobia, transphobia and biphobia.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (COMMITTEES)

Ordered,

That the Detention Centre (Amendment) Rules 2018 and the Immigration (Guidance on Detention of Vulnerable Persons) Regulations 2018 be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—
(*Wendy Morton.*)

Heathrow Expansion: Lakeside Energy from Waste Ltd

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Wendy Morton.)

5 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): We have just witnessed a wonderful debate on International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia that showed both passion and insight into the modern world. I am equally passionate about that subject, but this evening I wish to talk about the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant in my constituency. I am grateful for the opportunity to address the House on this important issue.

Lakeside Energy from Waste is not just a local energy provider in Windsor; it is an establishment of local, regional and national significance. I have concerns about the plant's viability and longevity if the third runway should go ahead at Heathrow, or even if it is threatened that the third runway should go ahead at Heathrow, and I will explain why.

The Lakeside Energy from Waste facility is situated on the proposed site of the third runway at Heathrow. The plant is the largest facility of its kind in England and has been in operation for just six years. The cost of relocation is estimated at between £500 million and £700 million and, from what I can see, with all the potential delays and all the other issues surrounding it, the cost could well run to as much as £1 billion. Those are large sums of money.

The site is of local significance because of the number of people it employs—around 300, plus others—so it provides local jobs. Regionally, it deals with 450,000 tonnes of waste each year, which is more than the non-recyclable waste produced in a year by the people of Birmingham and Manchester combined. It is a major national plant.

Some 90,000 tonnes of waste come from west London, 45,000 tonnes of waste come from south London and 30,000 tonnes of waste come from Surrey. Lakeside's impact is one of national significance because it deals with 40% of the country's hazardous waste, much of it medical waste. Seventeen NHS trusts, 500 GP surgeries and other medical establishments rely on Lakeside Energy from Waste.

The plant also provides electricity to the grid, powering up to 50,000 homes in the area, and of course Slough Borough Council enjoys the fruits of its labours in providing services to Lakeside Energy from Waste. I will not name the exact figure for commercial reasons, but a very large sum of money is taken in business rates by Slough Borough Council.

The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) was keen to be here for this debate, and he wants me to say that it is clear to him that the jobs and the economic and environmental benefits of Lakeside Energy from Waste are incredibly important to Slough Borough Council and the local area. He points out that 4% of UK waste is processed through the plant. Like me, he is concerned that there will be a detriment to the local area unless there is a clear and orderly plan, with clear responsibilities, for a replacement plant if the third runway goes ahead. My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), who spoke so passionately in the previous debate, has been consistent and clear in asking the

Government about who is responsible for ensuring the continuity of service if the third runway goes ahead and if the deadline for replacing the plant is missed.

My first concern is that, if the facility is demolished and not replaced—if there is a gap in service—the effects locally, regionally and nationally will be enormously harmful due to the inability to process the levels of waste that it is contracted to process. The second problem lies in the timeline for Heathrow's decisions about the third runway, because a replacement plant must be in place before the current plant is decommissioned to avoid a break in operations. Relocating the plant will take a minimum of five years, including one year alone for planning permission, three years for construction and another year for decommissioning the current plant. We can see how tight the timeline is, and the consequences will be enormous for waste processing if there is any gap in operations.

All that makes Heathrow's target of having a new runway operational by 2023 pretty much unachievable as things stand, and that assumes there will be no objections to people having an incinerator and a waste processing plant located near their homes. As Members of Parliament, we know that there is always an enormous number of objections from local residents whenever a new operation of this nature is promised. As far as I can see, no sites for new incinerator and waste processing plant have been identified, so it is hardly surprising that I am concerned that a site may not be available.

The delays and uncertainty are undermining the fantastic business that Lakeside Energy from Waste represents. How will it be possible for people to sign long-term contracts with the plant if there is uncertainty about its future? I am sure that that is having enormous consequences for its operations. Given that the relocation costs are perhaps likely to be in the region of £1 billion—the current estimate is £500 million to £700 million, but it could run towards £1 billion—that is an enormous amount in the context of the overall cost of developing a third runway.

Where is the money coming from? Airline charges are currently £22.53 per passenger, and rather than Heathrow Airport Ltd conjuring up the money to relocate the plant, passengers will bear the risk of the debt repayments on any secured loans and of ensuring a return on shareholder equity. Having the customers pay the enormous costs of something that does not necessarily benefit them directly does not seem like a good way to proceed with a national project of this nature. If Heathrow Airport Ltd raises the landing fee per passenger, it will probably have to go up to around £30 or £31, making Heathrow the most expensive airport in the world at which to land. If we are looking to become a more competitive nation, particularly as we head towards Brexit, it does not seem a good idea to proceed with a project that causes enormous challenges for waste recycling and processing and creates a white elephant when it comes to the price.

When considering the plant's relocation, Heathrow's financial viability is also called into question. As I said, the cost of relocation looks like it will be about 5% of the cost of the entire project. Looking at the gearing ratio of assets against borrowing, Heathrow is in a parlous position, so I worry that it will not be able to afford to proceed in the first place. We have become

incredibly concerned because Thames Water's gearing ratio is 81%, and it has been told that it must be reduced.

In 2012, the Civil Aviation Authority said that the National Air Traffic Services gearing ratio should be restricted to just 65%, yet Heathrow's gearing ratio is already at 87%, before it has even begun the third runway project. If it goes ahead, Heathrow's gearing ratio will end up somewhere around 91%. This is very worrying. Were I an investor, I would be worried, but as a Government I would be even more worried. As a user of the services of Lakeside Energy from Waste, I would be exceptionally worried that this would create enormous troubles for me, with a lack of continuity in waste processing.

Overall, my main concern is that there could well be a lack of continuity of service for waste disposal. I am also concerned that Heathrow's viability in coming up with the money to finance the relocation of the operation, particularly without a site having already been identified, is in question.

I have two core questions for the Minister; he will have heard them before, but I want to reiterate them. First, will the Government confirm that they unconditionally accept the Transport Committee's recommendation that

"a condition of approval"—

for the third runway—

"be specified in an updated"

national policy statement

"that provides the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant with equivalent recognition as the Immigration Removal Centres and that the replacement of its facilities be accounted for"

in the development consent order process?

Secondly, is there a way in which the Government can guarantee that there will be no break in service? If they maintain that

"the planning and costs of moving the Energy from Waste Plant would be a matter for the airport to take forward with the owners of the site",

I fear that that responsibility may well be placed on a private limited company, when we are talking about a waste processing plant that is an asset of national significance. Although I hope this will not be the case, let us say that it turns out that Heathrow Airport Ltd is responsible for relocating the plant; who then is going to pay for the necessary local infrastructure—the roads and perhaps even some rail—for the heavy goods vehicles that will need access to the plant?

In summary, I have huge concerns. It is no great secret that I think the third runway is a bit of a mistake. I hope the decision will be changed at some point. In the meantime, I simply emphasise this: if we are going to have one more runway, would it not be far simpler, greener, less costly and, more importantly, quicker to proceed with the runway at Gatwick, which would not encounter these problems? Even the Government's updated figures show that Gatwick gives a better net present value than Heathrow. A third runway at Heathrow would affect 2.2 million people more than they are affected today, and perhaps 300,000 people would begin to experience significant noise.

The Government have an opportunity to change their mind. When it comes to Lakeside Energy from Waste operations in Colnbrook, I urge the Government and the Minister to think carefully about continuity

and who is responsible for this national asset, which provides such good services to the NHS, local authorities and others.

5.13 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) on securing this important debate about the effect on Lakeside Energy from Waste Ltd of the Government's preference for a third runway at Heathrow. I shall address my hon. Friend's specific points shortly, but wish to begin by providing the House with some general context.

As my hon. Friend will know, the Government announced in October 2016 that their preference for delivering much-needed additional runway capacity in south-east England was a new north-west runway at Heathrow. The Government also set out that they would be taking this preference forward through the development of a national policy statement.

In terms of process, the Government have consulted twice on a draft airports NPS, and the second consultation closed on 19 December. The Transport Committee completed its scrutiny of the draft airports NPS on 23 March this year. I wish to take the opportunity to thank both the Committee for its important and timely work and the tens of thousands of members of the public who responded to our consultations. We are currently giving careful consideration to the Committee's 25 recommendations and all the consultation responses. The House will appreciate that, during this time of careful consideration, I am not able to discuss either the merits or content of any final airports NPS; or the Government's response to the consultations or the recommendations from the Transport Committee. Subject to that consideration, I can reassure my hon. Friend that we are on track to publish and lay before Parliament any final airports NPS in the first half of this year. It can then be debated in both Houses and will be the subject of a vote in this House.

Let me turn to the Energy from Waste plant itself. It is clear that should the north-west runway go ahead, it will result in the loss of the jointly owned Viridor and Grondon Lakeside Energy from Waste facility at Colnbrook, near Slough. The Lakeside complex houses a municipal waste incinerator as well as a high-temperature incinerator for clinical and other hazardous waste. The site handles 420,000 tonnes of waste annually, primarily taking waste from a number of authorities, including Slough, Reading, Wokingham, Bracknell and the West London Waste Authority. The site reportedly generates 37 MW of electricity to National Grid.

The high-temperature incinerator primarily provides a waste disposal service to NHS trusts and GP practices. In addition, the Metropolitan and Thames Valley police forces and the UK Border Force use the same facility for the safe disposal of contraband and controlled materials. Lakeside is one of five clinical waste incinerators in the south-east and London regions of comparable capacity. The incinerator at Lakeside has a capacity of 10,000 tonnes, of which 5,200 tonnes were in use in 2016.

In 2016, the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, for example, did not send any municipal waste to the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant. More than 33.5 kilo tonnes of mixed municipal waste was sent instead to the Ardley Energy from Waste plant in

[Joseph Johnson]

Oxfordshire. In terms of clinical waste, Windsor and Maidenhead sent more than half a tonne of clinical waste to the Lakeside clinical waste incinerator. However, it is noted that the majority of Windsor and Maidenhead's clinical waste—some 1.5 tonnes—was processed at Hillingdon Hospital.

In addition to the Lakeside site, expansion at Heathrow would affect a number of large businesses and facilities such as the British Airways headquarters at Waterside, a large number of airport hotels and the immigration removal centres. The draft NPS is clear that immigration removal centres play a vital role as part of the infrastructure, which allows the Government to maintain effective immigration control and to secure the UK's borders. Continuous provision of the immigration removal centres at Heathrow is necessary. This approach, which is different from that taken for other large-scale businesses, was taken as immigration removal centres are strategic assets, providing nationally critical infrastructure. The Government believe that it is necessary to require that these be replaced, without interruption of service.

The Airports Commission concluded in its 2015 final report that it would be “necessary” to replace the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant if the HAL scheme was preferred. In its consideration for the site, it noted that, while not of national importance, the site played a significant role in regional and local waste management and had a valuable capability to process clinical waste and other contaminated material.

In reviewing the Airport Commission's recommendation for the plant, the Government explored its role in UK waste management and energy plans across Departments, as well as seeking confirmation of any regulations or Government policy that would require the plant's replacement.

Both the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy assessed that the loss of the

plant would not impact the UK's ability to meet environmental targets on either a regional or a national basis. For these reasons, it is the Government's view that the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant is neither a strategic energy nor a waste asset, and with no regulatory or policy reason to replace the plant it would not be appropriate to mandate that it should be replaced. The Government have therefore taken the view that should the north-west runway scheme go ahead, it should be considered in the same way as other commercial property acquisitions and be treated as a commercial negotiation between the owners and the airport.

Any applicant will need to undertake a commercial negotiation with the owners of the plant to determine compensation. We understand that the site operators are working with Heathrow Airport Ltd and the relevant local and regulatory authorities to replace the facility on a like-for-like basis at a suitable nearby site in the event that any airports NPS is designated and the airport operator proceeds with an application for development consent.

In the revised draft NPS, the Government recognise the role of the plant in local waste management plans. This was changed to ensure that any applicant should make reasonable endeavours to ensure that sufficient provision is made to address the reduction in waste treatment capacity caused by the loss of the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant. Analysis of both NPS consultations and the TSC recommendations continues. During this process, we will continue to review the plant's status within any final airports NPS.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important debate. I appreciate that many Members of this House will have views on airport expansion, and I can assure them that they will have an opportunity to debate any final airports NPS.

Question put and agreed to.

5.22 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 17 May 2018

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

Local Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committees

1.30 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the First Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Effectiveness of local authority overview and scrutiny committees, HC 369, and the Government Response, Cm 9569.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Sharma. Today's debate will consider the report of what is now the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. At the time it was the Communities and Local Government Committee, but what's in a name change, after all?

The report looked into the effectiveness of local authority overview and scrutiny committees, which is an important subject. Perhaps it is a bit technical, and does not catch the main headlines in the popular press, but local government delivers important services to our local communities, including social care services for the elderly and children, emptying the bins, sweeping the streets, running libraries, and producing housing. Those are all important services, and it is important that they are done well and that the performance of authorities is scrutinised and monitored effectively.

Let us go back, for those of us who can remember, to how scrutiny came about in local government. We used to have a system—indeed, some councils are going back to it—in which all councillors were involved in the decision-making process, in the sense that they were members of committees. Then we had the idea that the Cabinet system, because it worked so well at national level, should be replicated at local authority level. Cabinets were set up in local government, and a number of councillors were appointed to them. I think someone either in Westminster or Whitehall then had the thought, “What do we do with the rest of the councillors who are not on the cabinet, who now haven't got committees to be on?”

Councillors perform a very important role as representatives of their local communities. Acting in their wards on behalf of their constituents is key to their role. Then someone thought, “What else can we do with them; they are sitting around the town hall, city hall or county hall with nothing else to do? Scrutiny committees are a good idea—we'll have those.” I think it was a bit of an afterthought on top of the cabinet system, although people who devised it at the time might say that it was not. Unfortunately, for some authorities, it has remained an afterthought—somewhere we can put to one side those councillors who do not have much to contribute anywhere else or, sometimes, councillors who have too much to say somewhere else and are a bit of a nuisance to the leadership of the council. Those in the leadership put such councillors on a scrutiny committee, and hope that they will go away and do something that does not really affect them.

Unfortunately, some councils see scrutiny as a problem. People can raise difficult issues that should not be raised, and sometimes it can become an issue of party political contention. Opposition councillors get put on scrutiny committees to make the life of the ruling party difficult, and ruling party councillors get put on them and told not to ask any difficult questions, because questions can always be raised in their group meetings afterwards. Councillors tell us that that is what is said to them.

However, there are very good examples of scrutiny; like Select Committees in this House, councillors challenge the executive, take on issues, investigate thoroughly and comprehensively, produce good reports and, rather than simply looking at something after the event, take policy initiatives and help to develop policy. Sometimes when there is a complicated issue—perhaps there is a general understanding in the council of where they want to get to, but not of how to get there—scrutiny committees can be really good at delving down and doing what they call “task and finish” to identify the key issues and technical difficulties, and come to agreed, well thought through conclusions. There are some really good examples of effective scrutiny.

There are good examples of councils going outside their council body and getting witnesses, expert witnesses and advisers in to help them, as Select Committees do. Unfortunately, such examples are rare. When councillors are asked why they do not get people from their local university to come in and help—those experts would probably be quite happy to be part of their local community engagement and democratic process—the response is often, “Oh—can we do that?”

We recommend looking at examples of best practice. Councils should learn from one another, and from the best examples of how to conduct scrutiny independently and effectively, by drawing in advisers from outside and engaging with the public in a meaningful way. Sometimes the way the public are engaged with—sitting at the back of a room while a council officer reads a report that has been written well in advance—is not very good. That does not engage the public, but we are looking at different ways of doing so. Taking scrutiny out to the community, setting up websites, and using social media are ways in which councils can develop and enhance scrutiny, as some of our Select Committees do.

This weekend I am going to Birmingham because the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, together with the Health and Social Care Committee, is doing an inquiry into social care. We are going to talk to the citizens' jury that we have established to provide information and evidence to the inquiry. It is the first time that our Committee has done that. The Committee is also doing an inquiry into the high street. We are using a website to try to get the public engaged in feeding in their information about what is happening in their high street, and what they think should happen. We would like to see such initiatives reflected in local government. Sometimes they are, and local authorities can learn from one another as well.

The key recommendation of our report is about the culture in local government. Do those in the leadership, both politically and at officer level, see scrutiny as important? Do they see it as part of the council's function, and as something that can add value to council decisions, or just as a bit of an irritant that can be put to one side and forgotten about? That was key to our

[Mr Clive Betts]

recommendations. The reality is that if councils value scrutiny and want to make it work, they can do it, even if they may do it slightly differently in different authorities.

I do not want to keep hon. Members for too long this afternoon, but the Committee made a number of specific recommendations. The Committee's key observation was that Government guidance on scrutiny has not been updated for a long time. The Government have accepted that, and they will produce new guidance—we had a positive discussion with the Minister about that at the evidence session. That is a good starting point, because it means that we can look at some of the other recommendations positively. Scrutiny committees should report not just to executive members of the council, but to the whole council. Again, the Government have accepted that, and we welcome it.

We recommended that scrutiny officers should have the necessary skills to help members of scrutiny committees to do investigations into detailed policy matters. We should not just have a clerk system in which someone says, "We're here to keep a record of attendance and get the witnesses in the right places." It should be about helping members with proper monitoring and policy development. The Government have basically accepted that recommendation as well.

Another issue was scrutiny of elected mayors and combined authorities. When any deal is done, it is really important to look at scrutiny, and ensure that resources are available for it. Those mayors and combined authorities are a further step removed, in some cases, from the people who elect them. The arrangements can be complicated, and it is important that there is proper scrutiny of them. The Government have accepted that point as well.

Moving on to issues on which the Government's response has been less enthusiastic, and those issues that need more consideration, the Government did not accept that a summary of the resources spent on scrutiny should be published each year alongside the summary of resources spent on the executive. The reality is that, in many councils, when cuts are made scrutiny is one of the things that gets cut, because it is a bit of an inconvenience and nobody will miss it if it does not happen. Of course, the executive looks after itself. That does not happen on all councils, but there is sometimes a feeling that that happens, because the executive makes the budget recommendations. We thought that saying to councils, "Look, just publish those figures," was an interesting way of demonstrating the extent to which they fund scrutiny, compared with other functions of the council. The Government said no to that. It seemed to us a fairly harmless recommendation, and we do not understand why the Government did not support it.

The Committee also said that a statutory scrutiny officer should be appointed in every council. Why not? They exist in unitary authorities and in counties, but not necessarily in second-tier authorities—the district councils—which perform very important functions. Why not a statutory scrutiny officer there as well?

The issue of what information is available to scrutiny committees is absolutely key. Following our report, I have done two or three talks to councillors on scrutiny committees and scrutiny officers. Everyone started nodding at the point we raised the issue of what information is

available. So many times councillors on scrutiny committees have been told, "You can't have that information; it is confidential." There are examples of councillors having to use freedom of information requests to get information from their own councils. That is ludicrous. It is nonsense. The words "commercial confidentiality" often appear as the explanation and the excuse.

The Government's response in that regard was an attempt to be helpful. They said that there should not be a blanket refusal to provide information and that information should be dealt with on its own merits. The very helpful point was made—I hope it is given some prominence in guidance to councils—that when contracts are let by councils, clauses should be put in to make it clear that information can be relayed to councillors and not just to a handful of people on the executive. Companies tendering for work should understand that right from the very beginning of the tendering process, before contracts are let. The Government need to build on that in the guidance because it is an absolutely key point—if the information is lacking, scrutiny cannot be done.

In many councils, more and more functions are not delivered in-house but are contracted out to private companies. Officers delivering a service in house can be called before the scrutiny committee, but if the information about a private contract is classed as commercially confidential, the contract cannot be scrutinised and nor can the service to the public. At the end of the day, that is the key point. Addressing that issue is fundamental to getting scrutiny right in an age when so many services are now delivered by third-party contractors. We must make sure not only that the information is available but that those individuals who are running the contract have to come before the scrutiny committees as well.

We also called for scrutiny committees to look at the work of local enterprise partnerships. Billions of pounds of public money is spent by LEPs, which are almost unaccountable to any part of the democratic process. The Government were receptive to the idea and said that there should be proper oversight and transparency of the operation of LEPs. They said that they would go away to think about that and write to the Committee. I know that the post is occasionally slow in this country, but I think the letter has got lost in the post. We have not received it yet. I hope the Minister has one in his pocket this afternoon to hand across the Chamber.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): We are writing it now.

Mr Betts: Okay. Clearly, I think it is an important issue. Who else is going to oversee the spending and work of the LEPs if not council scrutiny committees? That is very important.

There is something that somehow got lost altogether in the Government's response. Currently, councils have a right to oversee their own activities and the officers who perform them, although they need to do more about commercial companies. There is a very good set of rules for the health service. The service can be scrutinised by local council scrutiny committees and the health service bodies have to provide information. Officers have to come to scrutiny committees and be questioned about that. What about the other important public services?

The Department for Work and Pensions provides a lot of services at local level. So do the police. I know that the police have their own scrutiny arrangements for local police panels—I do not know whether they are quite the same—but certainly, lots of public services, such as those delivered by the DWP, are very important at local level. They do things that affect the public locally, but there is currently no local oversight. We suggested that they should be put in a similar position to health service bodies and that officials should have to provide information and evidence and be available to appear before scrutiny committees. The Government seem to have missed that out altogether in their response, as though they were a bit uncomfortable about it. I know that it might mean talking to one or two colleagues in other Departments, but it is a good proposal and one that would help transparency and monitoring of Government activity as well. I hope the Minister will be able to say a bit more about that this afternoon.

We look forward to the Government's guidance, as well as clarification of the one or two issues that I have identified, including that long-awaited letter, but to a large extent, at the end of the day it is down to councils. We can give them guidance, but we need to encourage them to take account of the report and to work with each other to improve scrutiny.

I know that the Local Government Association is starting to look at the issues. We had a very helpful letter just before the debate from the Centre for Public Scrutiny, which has an important role to play. It gave evidence to the Committee and is now working with the LGA on how to deal with a number of matters in a practical way. They are looking at the issue of councillor training, and at examples of good practice. They are looking at how councils can be helped to understand their responsibilities. I hope that they are going to look at the idea we recommended, which the Government said they were going to talk to the LGA about, of doing some pilots on the election of chairs of scrutiny committees.

Councils are, in the end—the Committee is very clear about this—locally elected bodies, and on the Select Committee we are all, by and large, localists who believe that things can be best done and organised at a local level, but we thought the idea of having chairs elected by the home council was quite a good one. We did not want it to be imposed on councils, but we suggested one or two pilots to show what could be done. The Minister might be able to let us know how far that has gone.

We certainly welcome the work that the LGA is now doing with the Centre for Public Scrutiny to take those ideas forward. We look forward to the guidance that the Government are eventually going to produce on the basis of the report.

1.46 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, for what I believe is the first time. It is also a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Select Committee and his presentation of the report. It is a unanimously agreed report that all members signed up to and agree with, and I speak as one who serves on the Committee. I spent 24 years as a local councillor before being elected to this place—no doubt you served many more, Mr Sharma. I know that the Chair of the Select Committee served in local government, as did the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist)—I think she continues to serve.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): No longer.

Bob Blackman: The hon. Lady has stepped down.

I came up through the committee system. When I was elected leader of the council, the Deputy Prime Minister at the time offered me the opportunity to pilot the cabinet structure. I said, “I think I have enough on my plate without piloting this cabinet structure, thank you very much, Mr Heseltine.”

The advantages of the committee system have to be remembered. All councillors served on committees and committees were held in public—there was great interest in what they debated. There was a political benefit as well, in that officers produced reports and until the time they voted on a report, whether a councillor was in the political group in charge or in opposition, they could oppose and amend the report and put in new recommendations of a political nature, which divorced the officers from the political side of the decision making, but it also enabled the ruling group to row back from something that was possibly not in the public interest of their area. That was one of the advantages.

The big disadvantage was that the process was very slow and often cumbersome and uncertain. That is why almost every council in the country moved to the cabinet structure as quickly as they could. Its disadvantage is that decisions are made in private; they are not transparent to the public. Although cabinet or executive meetings are held in public, the most important decisions are taken in private before those meetings take place. Up and down the country, very few members of the public bother to attend cabinet or executive meetings, and the press—and councillors, in general—have given up interest. That is a really serious drawback.

Overview and scrutiny is a vital part of our democratic process. I will come to some of the recommendations that I am disappointed the Government did not accept in a minute. I take the view that overview and scrutiny are two separate things. Overview is the development of policy. The ruling group on a council should take ownership of it and really drive it as a means of developing policy for the whole council. Scrutiny is about examining decisions that have been made or are about to be made, and ensuring that they are fit for purpose, that they are the right decisions and that they are justified.

I served for 24 years on Brent London Borough Council, which is very confrontational, and we reached a constitutional settlement whereby the chair of scrutiny had to be from the opposition and elected by full council, exactly as the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said. We were the pioneers. The two major parties agreed that that was the right way to go. At every council meeting, the chair of the scrutiny committee reported directly to the council with a written report on their scrutiny work, and there were questions to the chair of the scrutiny committee at full council. At times it was embarrassing for the ruling group, but there was proper scrutiny of the decision-making process.

I also served for four years as chair of the forward plan select committee, which sounds pretty horrendous. We brought together colleagues from across the council to scrutinise the expected work of the executive to ensure that they were delivering on their plan and that the responsible councillors knew what they were talking about. It was similar to the Housing, Communities and

[*Bob Blackman*]

Local Government Committee: whenever anyone visits our Select Committee, it is very hard for them to determine which political party its members are from, because we all want to improve the Government's work and we are not party political. It is a model of good practice.

If scrutiny is not properly resourced, it tends to be an inconvenience. Senior officers say, "It would be a lot better if we could just get on with the job, rather than having to account to councillors." The chief executives and chief officers of certain local authorities downplay scrutiny because they find it inconvenient; it gets in the way of getting the job done. I have less sympathy for that view, because the reality is that good scrutiny improves decision making, improves services and ensures transparency in the public eye.

I hope that when the Government issue their guidance on public scrutiny they will look at such measures. I am a localist—I believe it is absolutely right that local authorities make their own decisions about their processes—but it is good practice that the chair of scrutiny be elected by full council, and ideally that they be a member of the opposition. It is then up to them how to play it, but I suspect that if the opposition play it sensibly—if they call the executive to account, as opposed to playing party political games—the scrutiny will be very effective. That is a key item.

I also have concerns about private and confidential information that is not disclosed to councillors. I take the view that all information should be available to councillors on reasonable request, unless the legal officers certify that it should not be made available. The presumption should be that all information is available to councillors, not selectively. If there is a contractual or other reason to keep it secret during the decision-making process, that is reasonable, but once the decision has been made all information should be made available so that it can be properly scrutinised. I worry that serious errors—not underhand dealings—are often made by local authorities. There are concerns about how contracts are let and about decision making, and there are conflicts of interest among both councillors and council officers. That needs to be exposed in the glare of publicity, and the best way of doing that is through the scrutiny process. I hope that the Government will look at that in the guidance that will be issued, because it needs to be firmed up considerably. Because some local authorities do not take scrutiny seriously enough, we should publish the amount of money and resource available. It must be scrutinised, and the executive and senior officers must be held to account. That would enable us to see a proper comparison.

There is an opportunity here for a great renaissance in local government scrutiny. The executive or the cabinet makes decisions on behalf of the local authority. There is now a whole series of academy trusts—schools that are outside the control of the local education authority—so why should the local authority not scrutinise their work? I know that Ofsted does that, but why should the local authority not look at what matters for local people? As the hon. Gentleman said, why should the local authority not scrutinise the police in certain cases? In my experience, health authorities fight tooth and nail to prevent information being provided to scrutiny committees. Even though they are required to provide information, they put every

blockage they can in place. Then there is the fire service. I could go through every public service that affects a local area. Why should local authority scrutiny not be used to examine the services that are provided to the public?

We could go even further and be even more radical. We could look at the central Government resources that are applied to a local area. Perhaps they could be scrutinised by the local authority—I suspect that there may be some resistance to that idea from the Government. This is an opportunity to expand the role of local authorities and local councillors, who do a brilliant job of reporting issues that concern their constituents. We could empower them even more. By empowering them, we would give them an opportunity to shape the place they live and work in. That would put oxygen into the life of local authorities, and would encourage not only the press but local people to participate in their local authority's work. At the moment, I am afraid the mood is, "Well, they just get on with it. We vote once every four years, or once every year, to elect local councillors, and unfortunately that doesn't do the job."

The Minister is new to his role, and was not responsible for writing the Government response to our noble report, so perhaps he can reconsider some of our recommendations in the light of this debate. That would show that he is not only reading and absorbing our reports, but listening to what we have to say.

1.58 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. After I came to this House, I joined the Communities and Local Government Committee, as it then was, last September. I was a local councillor, so taking part in the Committee's inquiry into overview and scrutiny in local government was an easy passage into the Committee's work. I felt confident in contributing to the inquiry. I have stood down as a councillor in Gateshead Council, which was a great regret to me. I think councillors have a huge role to play in representing their communities, but we cannot be everywhere.

Almost one year since my election, I am pleased to speak in this debate on the Committee's report. It gives me a great chance to thank the many witnesses and the contributors to the report, and to acknowledge the huge contribution made by local councillors, especially back-bench ones whose job is to scrutinise the work of council executives and to take part in overview and scrutiny.

The report highlights a number of issues, which have been discussed by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I want to talk about three things in particular: resources, information and training for councillors. There were a great many other recommendations, but I shall touch on those three.

First, in order to have effective scrutiny, which can contribute greatly to the running and effectiveness of an authority, it is important to have adequate resources in order to support members of the council in their work, as we have in Select Committees. To get to the nitty-gritty of council business, someone needs a lot of time, concentration and knowledge. Like my colleagues, therefore, I was disappointed when the Government did not agree to survey what resources are going into overview and scrutiny. It is important for authorities to be clear

about the need for overview and scrutiny committees to be resourced so that they can work effectively. By not conducting that survey, I am afraid that—as colleagues have said—we are letting those who may not be so enthusiastic lie low. I very much hope that the Minister will look again at the need to gather information about resources available to the committees.

Secondly, apart from officer time, a really important resource is information. One of the issues raised during our inquiry was the ability of committee members to access information about the council or about services provided by third parties and external organisations. Too often, committees are told that such information is covered by commercial confidentiality, so they are not able to look effectively at whether a contract is being performed as it should be and whether it is providing value for money. It is a positive move for the Government to say that local authorities should look at that positively, but we need to be much firmer about saying that those who scrutinise either council services provided by external parties or even internal services have the right to the full information necessary. We need greater transparency and better availability of information, so that it does not have to be dragged from authorities or external bodies, but is available to committees when they need it, when considering important reports.

Thirdly, I will touch on training. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East mentioned the letter we had from the Centre for Public Scrutiny, which talks about some of the work it is doing to strengthen scrutiny. It is important that elected members are very clear about how they go about scrutiny work, that they have the tools at their disposal to make the most of the information they have, and that they can do an effective job of scrutinising the work of the local authority, whether looking into particular services or at regular key performance indicators. It is important that people have the training and knowledge to know what they are doing, basically, and too often that is avoided.

I welcome the fact that the Government have accepted that idea that overview and scrutiny committees should report to full council. It is important that the role of overview and scrutiny and its significance are recognised and that there is space for the committees to report to full council, so that all council members are aware of what is happening and the important issues they are facing.

That is as much as I wanted to say. I certainly commend the report, and I hope that the Government will think again about some of the areas that we have pointed out.

2.4 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma.

I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), and I bow to their superior experience as councillors. I was a councillor for six years. It is a hard job, and I respect everyone who stands up to represent their community, putting their head above the parapet. I also have experience of the committee and scrutiny systems, and I have to say that as a back-bench councillor I preferred the committee system—I felt that I had more input—but I can see that that might depend on which local authority it is.

Scrutiny has to be a good thing. It is right and proper that the executive are held to account, that thorough assessment is made of whether policies represent real value for money, and that there is ongoing monitoring of how they affect the public. Scrutiny should not just be retrospective; it should also ensure that policy making can be improved. That is how we see scrutiny in Parliament—we hold the Government to account in debates such as this one, for example—and there is some parallel with local government, but sometimes councils do not always give their scrutiny committees the wonderful support and resources that we have in this place for our Select Committees. We have Committee Clerks, training, a wealth of resources and availability of information, which is why Select Committee reports such as the one we are discussing are so highly regarded.

Another issue in local authorities is that party politics can sometimes be more single state. As we know, in some parts of the country the Conservatives dominate, while in others things are the other way around. That is how constituents want it, which is quite right—it is democracy. However, that can have an impact on scrutiny. In some authorities one party sometimes has to hold itself to account, which can make life difficult for individuals. What incentive is there for a back-bench councillor to criticise his or her own ruling executive's policies? To do so has been described, in some instances, as not a great career move. That is something to think about. Our Select Committees have a mix of Members and some are chaired by the Opposition, so they are truly cross-party, with real legitimacy and standing as a result.

All that means we have to be more nuanced in how we look at local government. One size does not fit all and, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East, there is the culture. At their best, overview and scrutiny committees should be regarded as constructive, and as a critical friend, but there is a tendency, I fear, for some council leaders to see them as a challenge. That might be because of the political make-up of the council, but it might be an ingrained attitude—the executive makes the decisions, which are made in the best interests of the people, so challenging them is somehow disloyal. The report acknowledges that and points out that the culture at the top determines whether scrutiny is seen as effective.

Culture also determines whether councillors get the correct information to do scrutiny properly. That is a key issue that has been mentioned a number of times. When I was on the scrutiny committee, I had 24-page reports given to me the day before a meeting. I was also doing a full-time job, so that did not encourage effective scrutiny—it was in fact another way of discouraging it, which can be done either by giving no information or by giving so much information, in such detail, that no one reads it.

Mr Betts: My hon. Friend makes a good point about how councils work. Their challenge is greater than ours here in the House of Commons, where not only do we have independent Select Committees, but even Government Members are a little more removed from Ministers on a daily basis than councillors are from the cabinet members. Councillors are often in the same room with cabinet members, or part of groups that make the decisions for which cabinet members are responsible, in a way that does not happen in the House. It is a bigger challenge, so getting that culture right is key.

Yvonne Fovargue: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend: it is a challenge, but it is one that we must look at. I am pleased that the Government are responding and will produce good practice.

I shall single out two or three of the recommendations. I feel that a statutory scrutiny officer for all councils is fully justified. Yes, councils can make their own choices, but such an appointment at a senior level can only help to raise the standing of scrutiny, prevent it from being marginalised and make suggestions to the executive about how it could work better in future.

I register my support for the scrutiny of local enterprise partnerships. There is much that is wrong with local enterprise partnerships, not least their lack of transparency and accountability. I believe that scrutiny needs to follow the public pound. It should not matter if services are in-house or outsourced through complex partnerships or contracts; the public have a right to know how their money is spent, because they are all taxpayer-funded services. Councils can outsource their services, but not the responsibility for them. Part of that responsibility is allowing them to be scrutinised. I agree with the hon. Member for Harrow East that a lot of other public services affect the local area: the police, the fire brigade and academy schools. They should all be subject to scrutiny, because everything that happens there affects the local resident. Surely, that is what local councils are about: what affects their local residents.

I would like to single out the recommendation to increase the funding for the scrutiny of metro mayors. Perhaps if we had more resources in this regard we would have never had the scenario where the last Mayor of London avoided accountability over the release of funding for the abortive garden bridge, even though the stipulated conditions were not in place for that to happen. Taxpayers have been forced to pick up the £46 million bill.

I thank the Committee for its report, which contains some sensible recommendations. It is a challenge to improve the scrutiny of local authorities, because of their different make-up and how they differ from central Government, but we need to accept that challenge; it is an important function in any democracy. I was impressed by the remark the hon. Member for Harrow East made about putting the oxygen back into scrutiny by engaging the public again. Too often the public elect their councillors and do not think about them again for the next four years. They need to look at the decisions that those councillors make. Scrutiny is an important way that they can be involved in that.

2.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, I think for the first time. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) on securing the debate. I thank him and the members of his Committee for their important work. I stand here in some trepidation, responding to a debate in which I think I am the only parliamentarian who has not been a local councillor at some point.

Mr Betts: There is still time.

Rishi Sunak: One job at a time, perhaps. Collectively, there is probably over half a century's worth of local government experience in the room. I pay tribute to

that service. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East said that this may not be a topic that attracts front-page headline news, but nevertheless it is an important topic. It is a credit to him and his Committee that they took the time to thoroughly investigate a topic that deserves scrutiny but that otherwise may not have had the chance to be debated and aired in this place.

Scrutiny is fundamentally important to the successful functioning of local democracy, so I welcome the opportunity to reflect on the Committee's findings. It has a key role to play in ensuring local accountability and the efficient delivery of public services. Scrutiny committees can play a key role in voicing the concerns of local people. I hope the Government response makes it clear that I value the role that scrutiny can play in supporting accountable and transparent decision making and the effective delivery of council functions. The principal takeaway point for me from the Committee's report, which the hon. Member for Sheffield South East alluded to, is that the organisational culture determines whether scrutiny works well. Where there is a culture of welcoming challenge, the scrutiny process in councils is effective.

I would like to start by setting out the core principles that underpin Government's approach to scrutiny, before turning to the specific recommendations of the report. First, councils are democratically elected bodies and are ultimately accountable to their electorate. Secondly, as a localist, I take the view that councils are best placed to know which scrutiny arrangements will suit their own individual circumstances. Thirdly, Government have a role to play in ensuring that councils are aware of what effective scrutiny looks like and how best to carry it out. Lastly, overview and scrutiny is just one part of the wider accountability framework for local government, along with the requirement to publish certain information online for transparency, the requirements for independent audit, the complaints process and the presence of independent local media.

The rationale behind the Government's response was, therefore, to accept those recommendations that would increase councils' understanding of the importance of scrutiny and how to conduct it, but to tread carefully with the requirements that would place additional requirements on local authorities or reduce their flexibility to decide for themselves which scrutiny arrangements to put in place.

I will turn to some of those specific recommendations. The Committee's first recommendation clearly will enhance councils' understanding of the importance of scrutiny and how to conduct it. The Committee pointed out, not unfairly, that statutory guidance was updated more than a decade ago. I was more than happy to agree to update that. I am keen that the new guidance is of genuine use to councils and is not just a tick-box exercise that simply restates their legal obligations. My Department is already at work with the sector to ensure that it delivers the right messages in the right way. Broadly, the guidance will seek to ensure that councils know the purpose of scrutiny, what effective scrutiny looks like, how to conduct it effectively and the benefits it can bring. More specifically, it will cover some of the specific things that were heard today, such as reports to full councils or the role of the public. I look forward to publishing that revised guidance before the end of this year.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East and the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) raised the concern of public scrutiny of local enterprise partnerships. The Committee's report seemed to suggest that it was the exception rather than rule. I want to reassure hon. Members that I agree fully that local scrutiny is essential to holding LEPs to account. The local enterprise partnerships national assurance framework is set by central Government and LEPs must comply with it to receive funding.

Last year, one of the Department's non-executive directors, Mary Ney, led a review into LEP governance and transparency. We are in the process of fully implementing all her recommendations; but I agree there is more to do to ensure that LEPs and local partners collaborate effectively to deliver better outcomes for the public. That is why we are currently undertaking a Minister-led review that will consider the role of local scrutiny in LEP governance. It will also bring forward reforms to LEPs' roles, leadership, accountability and geography. It will be published in the coming months.

I apologise to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East and his Committee that he has not received the letter that he is due. I will ensure that gets to him in short order, to set out what has already happened and what is happening to improve governance and scrutiny for LEPS.

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for that reassurance. We will get a letter in short order saying that something will happen in the coming months. Could the Minister be more precise about what "the coming months" might mean?

Rishi Sunak: I would love to be, but the review is being conducted by my colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), so I do not have the exact timing to hand. The review was announced through the industrial strategy White Paper. I am sure that we will share as much information as we are able to with the Committee. The hon. Gentleman knows that, alongside that, the assurance framework is in the process of being reviewed and updated. That work is going on with people in the industry, including the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and officials. I will make sure that all that is contained in the letter, with as much transparency on timing as we are able to give.

Another key concern that the Committee raised was that scrutiny seemed to be a second-order matter for combined authorities. I assure hon. Members that I take accountability in these new authorities very seriously. I am confident that the framework we have put in place provides the basis for a robust and consistent approach to scrutiny for combined authorities across the country. In particular, the Combined Authorities (Overview and Scrutiny Committees, Access to Information and Audit Committees) Order 2017 was a key step in implementing devolution deals, and will ensure effective accountability for the new budgets and powers that have been devolved.

Members raised the question of resourcing. The Government announced at the last Budget that they will make available to mayoral combined authorities a £12 million fund for financial years 2018-19 and 2019-20

to boost Mayors' capacity and resources. Combined authorities are free to use that to ensure that scrutiny and accountability arrangements are effectively resourced and supported.

I turn to the recommendations that the Government are considering. Access to information was raised by all three Back-Bench Members who spoke—my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the hon. Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Sheffield South East. They made a persuasive and compelling case that we should have a hard look at that area. As a new Minister, I tell my hon. Friend that the point about information was the one thing that really stuck with me. In our response to the Select Committee, we committed to looking at that and deciding how best to manage it.

I agree that scrutiny committees should be able to access the information they need to do their jobs effectively. I can see that some executives might seek to deny committees access to that information if they do not appreciate their obligations or understand the value of scrutiny. I want to take soundings from the sector and figure out how best to move forward before committing, but hon. Members' case that this is something we should consider carefully will stick with me, and I will ensure that I take it away. If we decide that new measures are appropriate, I will of course come back to the Select Committee with those.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and the hon. Member for Sheffield South East also raised the role of elected chairs. My officials and I will speak to the sector and think about how best we can establish the impact of elected chairs on the effectiveness of scrutiny committees. In general, chairs should be selected on the basis of their skills, experience, integrity and objectivity, not of how amenable they are to the executive. Although the new guidance will remind councils that they already have the option to elect rather than appoint a chair, it is right that every council should decide for itself how to select its members.

Let me say a few words about some of the recommendations about which there is a small difference of opinion, which I hope I can explain. On the point about councils publishing a summary of resources, although the Government require councils to publish certain information for transparency purposes, making available details of the resources allocated to scrutiny would be difficult in practice, for the simple reason that councils often do not have a dedicated scrutiny officer or staff. Instead, they pull in resources as and when they are needed, so it may be difficult for them to produce accurate figures.

Bob Blackman: I remember that a former Secretary of State—namely, Sir Eric Pickles—believed absolutely in transparency, such that he insisted that every council must publish every item of expenditure in excess of £500. Given that I do not think that policy has changed, what is the problem with asking councils to publish what should be a considerably higher figure than £500?

Rishi Sunak: I agree that transparency is important, and I am glad that my hon. Friend supports the transparency agenda, which the Government continue to lead. Transparency is of course the best disinfectant and the best way for accountability to work in practice. There is a practical difficulty with trying to aggregate lots of small expenditures, which is why there is a

[*Rishi Sunak*]

£500 threshold in the transparency code. I agree that £50 here, £25 there and another £100 there may add up to a greater figure, but identifying all the individual components may be tricky. However, I agree that transparency is important.

The hon. Member for Blaydon mentioned training. In its report, the Select Committee suggests that the training offered to members and officers does not always meet their needs, and that the Department needs to better manage the funding it provides to the sector. Having looked into the training offer, I remain broadly happy with it. It already includes a specific two-day course for new or aspiring scrutiny chairs, and I am comfortable that, for now, it meets the needs of the sector.

I note that the Local Government Association wrote to the Select Committee to provide further details of the overwhelmingly positive feedback it has received about its training programme. The Committee will be aware that our new memorandum of understanding with the LGA sets out our expectation that it will remain responsive to feedback and ensure that the training it offers remains relevant and effective. However, I agree that training is important, and I hope that the response the Committee gets from the LGA reassures it that what is in place is at least a good foundation.

Liz Twist: I thank the Minister for those comments. Will he ensure that all authorities not only know that the training offer is there, but encourage their officers and members to take it up? We heard that not all authorities do that, so it would be really helpful if the Government, through the LGA, stressed that point.

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady is right. I note that in its oral evidence, the LGA recognised the need to get into councils that might not be doing scrutiny as well as they should. I think it will have taken that message away as a result of coming before the Select Committee and engaging on this topic, and I will pass that message on, too, to ensure that it was heard loud and clear.

Mr Betts: I am not sure whether the Minister covered this point. He spoke about the importance of access to information and about considering how that can be improved, but he did not make it clear whether that applies just to information held by councils themselves or to information held by other public bodies, such as the Department for Work and Pensions, the police service and the fire service, just as it already applies to the Department of Health and Social Care and its bodies at local level. Does he accept that scrutiny committees have a right to scrutinise and access information and witnesses from those other public organisations?

Rishi Sunak: I was talking specifically about information relating to councils' own functions in the first instance. On the broader point, which was also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, there are existing mechanisms for health and crime because, when those structures were set up, those were the agencies that the sector felt it did the most partnership working with. I am happy to talk to the sector to find out whether there is appetite for a greater ability to scrutinise other bodies, whether that process would work practically, and whether the burden it would put on authorities is appropriate. It

is important to recognise that many of those other parts of the public sector are scrutinised separately, and to ensure that there is not duplication of scrutiny. Every public agency tries to focus on its day job, so we need to get the balance right between having appropriate scrutiny and not duplicating scrutiny, which would mean taking focus and resources away from agencies doing their job.

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for giving way a second time on this point. I hope that, having looked at that and talked to the sector about it, he will write back to the Select Committee with his findings. It is difficult to see where the Department for Work and Pensions has a spotlight shone on it often and effectively at local level. I recognise his point about putting burdens on local government. This is intended to be not a burden but an opportunity, which local authorities may take up if they wish. There would not be a requirement to scrutinise other bodies, but authorities would have the opportunity to do so if they wished.

Rishi Sunak: I will of course write to the hon. Gentleman when we have had conversations with the sector on that point.

Bob Blackman: I want to clarify the point about information, which goes absolutely to scrutiny. I made the point that the presumption should be that information should be available. Rather than the current position, in which officers grudgingly give information to scrutiny committees and suchlike, it should be for the legal officer to say why information should not be available. Will my hon. Friend look at that specific point in detail and come back to the Select Committee?

Rishi Sunak: Hopefully I can reassure my hon. Friend. The main point that I have taken from the debate from all contributions is about access to information and ensuring that it is not unreasonably withheld. It is tricky to get the balance right, making sure that time is not wasted and that information that is genuinely commercial or commercially sensitive in some other regard is protected. However, I have heard that message loud and clear and it is a fair point, so I will go away and think about it in more depth.

Of course, such conversations with the sector are already happening and if there is a path to do something different, we will consider it. I would be loth to commit to something now, but I can commit to examining the issue properly and seriously, given the weight and force of the arguments made.

It was reassuring to see that the Committee's report acknowledges that scrutiny is working effectively in many councils. We should recognise that. Of course, we should accept that in some places it does not work as well as might be expected, but it does have a key role to play in ensuring local accountability and the effective delivery of services so it is important that councils know how to do it properly. I have committed to working with the sector to update the guidance, ensuring that it meets the needs of councillors and their officers, and I am happy to give further consideration to some of the topics I touched on earlier.

I thank hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to discuss this important topic. We are talking about

scrutiny and, as was raised in Members' comments, Select Committees, and in particular the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, which I am privileged to appear before, are a great example of how scrutiny can work in practice. It works best in this place—as it should in local authorities—when done on a collegiate basis, with people putting the interests of the public whom they serve first and working as a constructive friend of the people who are trying to make decisions. This Committee is a fantastic example for local authorities and the local government sector to look at. It is a pleasure to work with it, not just on this issue, but hopefully on other issues in the months to come.

2.31 pm

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for his response—whether it was positive or not will depend on the outcome of those further consultations. He gave us a general indication that he recognises the important role of scrutiny in local government, which is done well in many councils and not so well in others. Improvement is down to the sector, working with the Centre for Public Scrutiny. We look forward to receiving the guidance, which will be really important, and further information about how LEPs might be more effectively scrutinised.

The Minister has clearly got the message about information for scrutiny committees, which is very important, both within the council and hopefully more widely as we look at providing information to other public bodies. We look forward to his coming back to us on that point. Hopefully the Committee's report and—eventually—the Government's collective response can mean not just an improvement in scrutiny, which of itself is not the endgame, but an improvement in the public services that our constituents receive from their local authorities.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the First Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Effectiveness of local authority overview and scrutiny committees, HC 369, and the Government Response, Cm 9569.

2.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Freedom of Speech: Universities

[SIR HENRY BELLINGHAM *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, Freedom of Speech in Universities, HC 589.

It is a pleasure to speak in this Chamber with you in the Chair, Sir Henry. I am grateful to the Liaison Committee for giving us the opportunity to discuss the Joint Committee's report; to the Minister for being here; to the members of the Committee, particularly those who are here; to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who represents the Scottish National party; and to the Labour Front Bencher, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden).

The inquiry started because the then Minister for higher education, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), who is now a Transport Minister, made a number of comments about there being a problem with free speech in universities. Bearing in mind the importance of free speech to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and its importance in universities, we thought it right to look into the matter.

Let me remind Members that the Joint Committee is half Lords and half Commons. We are very fortunate because we have members not only from the main parties—the Conservatives and the Labour Opposition—but from the SNP and the Liberal Democrats, and we have Lord Trimble from Ireland, so we are a very broad-ranging and sage Joint Committee. It also includes a former Lord Chief Justice, in the shape of Lord Harry Woolf. We are all strongly committed to human rights and wanted to look at whether there was a problem with freedom of speech in universities—freedom of speech being one of the most basic human rights.

The right to free speech is of course a foundation for democracy. It is important in all settings, but especially in universities, where education and learning are advanced through dialogue and debate. It underpins academic freedom. Universities are places where ideas are developed. A diverse range of interesting and sometimes controversial topics should be debated.

Of course, that has always been the case. Back in the day, when I was at York University—that was not recently—we had heated debates and lots of protests. If ever someone from the South African apartheid regime came to the university, we were all out protesting and demonstrating. We demonstrated and protested against the Government in relation to their policy of internment in Northern Ireland. We protested for women's rights. You name it; we were debating and protesting about it. That has always been the case, and it remains the case to this day, when additional issues are causing concern. Just as we protested about the National Front, so today's students protest against the British National party. They have protests and controversial debates about Syria. We certainly never discussed trans rights when I was at university, but that is now the subject of heated debate at universities. The need to have controversial debates is not new, and free speech, particularly at universities, is very important indeed.

[Ms Harriet Harman]

I think it is true to say that when the Joint Committee went into this inquiry, having heard the Minister say that there was a problem, we went in with open minds. We were not sure whether it was just a case of a flurry of stories from the *Daily Mail* saying, "All students have become snowflakes and are shutting down other students' right to debate," so we went in with an open mind. Indeed, I was quite sceptical about whether there really was a problem. But it is also true to say that at the end of all the evidence—we heard evidence from university administrators, student unions, student societies, particularly Jewish societies and Islamic societies, campaigners such as Peter Tatchell, trans rights protagonists and, indeed, Members of the House of Commons—we were all convinced that there was a problem and that the Minister was right to raise it. The question we considered was what was causing the problem and how it should be solved.

The Minister, when raising this matter, had said that the problem was students. However, we felt that the problem was not only students inhibiting one another's time and opportunity to speak, but a number of other issues, such as the Prevent duty, the Charity Commission, university bureaucracy and the complexity of overlapping guidance. However, just as a starting point, we all ought to be clear that the phenomenon of people wearing masks and bursting into meetings, threatening and intimidating people and trying to stop them speaking, is not the right to protest; it is actually criminal activity.

None of us on the Joint Committee feels any sympathy at all with people who say that they are exercising their right to protest but come in with masks on and set off smoke bombs. We have an unequivocal view about that. For a start, we do not know whether those who have been doing that are actually students, because obviously they are masked. Sometimes, when their identity is disclosed, it turns out that they are not students. They should be charged for breach of the peace, threatening behaviour and any other criminal offence that suits the occasion, but certainly if they are students from the university and they are coming in with masks over their faces, they should be disciplined. That is not the right to protest; it is an inhibition on other people's right to free speech.

It was a particular irony that, according to one newspaper report I saw, the masked protestors were coming in to protest that the university should be a safe space. Nothing is less safe than someone who is wearing a mask breaking into a meeting and threatening people, so we have no truck with that. However infrequently it happens, it absolutely must be stamped down on.

I will give hon. Members just a couple of examples. In March, the King's College London libertarian society invited speakers in. The debate had been under way for about 30 minutes when a group of between 16 and 20 hooded and masked protestors stormed the front entrance of the Strand campus building, jumped over the security barriers, ignited smoke bombs and forced their way into the Safra lecture theatre. In the process, they knocked a security guard unconscious, and he was taken to hospital. A number of other staff and students were injured during the violent protest. Actually, we should not dignify that with the name "protest". We are totally against it. We cannot have the disruption of meetings.

We also heard evidence from the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who in February had gone to speak at a meeting of the politics and international relations society of the University of the West of England in Bristol. Again, people with scarves over their faces and wearing dark glasses burst into the room. They were shouting that the hon. Gentleman was a bigot and various other insults and, as he made clear, it was evident that they just wanted to stop the event. There were 300 people there who wanted to engage in a serious discussion and four or five people who were determined to disrupt it. That is totally unacceptable, whether or not they are students.

Aside from the issue of people bursting into meetings, there are other inhibitions on free speech that we discovered through the evidence we took. We were concerned about the guidance issued by the Government in relation to the Prevent duty deterring some students, particularly Muslims, from inviting or questioning speakers they wanted to hear. The Joint Committee feels that the Government absolutely have an obligation to keep us safe and to keep the country free from terrorism, but the Prevent guidance is so widely drawn, particularly as it relates to universities, that undoubtedly some believe that they are in danger of breaching it and that they could be reported and get into trouble if they invite certain speakers. The Prevent duty states:

"When deciding whether or not to host a particular speaker,"—
university bodies, including student unions—

"should consider carefully whether the views being expressed, or likely to be expressed, constitute extremist views...or are shared by terrorist groups."

It might be that I am a vegetarian and my views on vegetarianism are shared by a particular terrorist group, but does that put someone in breach of the Prevent duty? We felt that the duty is in a good cause, but it is widely drawn in such a way that it inhibits free speech. We therefore ask the Government to review the Prevent duty. It is about time it was reviewed generally, but perhaps they will do it with a view to looking at its impact on free speech.

Universities in England and Wales have a duty to promote free speech. It is different in Scotland. We had the benefit of the Scottish National party's hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who helped us contrast the situation in Scotland with that in the rest of the UK. Under the Education Act 1986, universities in England and Wales have a duty to promote free speech, but the problem is that the way some of them go about it ironically ends up inhibiting free speech.

Hansard cannot show this, but hon. Members can see this organogram showing the process that students have to go through when applying for a meeting. There are application forms to fill in and time limits to comply with. Some universities require students not only to name the speaker in advance, but to give a biography of them and provide an advance copy of the speech they will make. That would not be possible with any of the speeches that I make in universities, because I prepare my speech on the train. The point is that it is inhibiting. It is all about risk aversion, what people cannot do and tying them up with bureaucracy.

Newcastle's code of practice for freedom of speech for external speakers warns against people communicating in a way that might unreasonably offend others. That is

not acceptable. We should have free speech, even if it is found to be offensive by some others. Southampton talks a lot about speakers holding controversial views. The whole point about a debate is that it is two different views and therefore people should not shy away from controversy. Some of the university procedures are controversy-averse, which we thought was in opposition to free speech.

Another organisation that is controversy-averse is the Charity Commission, which is having a chilling effect on free speech. Its guidance warns student unions that they could risk their charitable status if they have controversies that could risk their reputation as a charity. We think that the Charity Commission goes way beyond the law and is having a chilling effect on students' free speech.

No speaker has the right to speak in a university, but students have a right to hear who they want to hear irrespective of whether others might find it offensive or insulting. There is a place for meetings of, say, people who have been victims of sexual assault or those of a particular religion, but we cannot have the whole campus being a safe space with the lowest common denominator.

There is an overlapping set of guidance from many institutions, including the Equality and Human Rights Commission, so the Joint Committee drew up our own guidance. The Committee is heaving with lawyers with good political judgment, and we have expert legal advice—when you have the Lord Chief Justice on your Committee, you get the law right. That is what we have done, so we have saved the Minister and his Department any effort. We have issued guidance on free speech for universities and students when organising events. It states, “You can say whatever you like, so long as it is not against the law, and this is what the law is.” One simple piece of guidance is what is needed, because guidance under the Prevent duty, from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, from the Charity Commission and from the union administrations is all too much. We know that students have other things to do in their lives—I will not name them, and I probably do not even know what they are now—so they have to get on with their lives and they cannot be bound up with bureaucracy.

I thank the Minister for the way he has responded. His predecessor spoke a lot about this subject, but I could not detect any action. This Minister is actually doing something and has brought people together, so I am confident that, with the good work under way on our Committee, with the shared commitment that we all have to freedom of speech, and with the Minister's action, we can enable debate to flourish on university campuses, which is what we all want to see all across the country.

3.15 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): This inquiry is one of the most important that we have undertaken in my three years on the Joint Committee on Human Rights. As we have heard, we received some very disturbing evidence. Free speech is indeed a foundation for democracy in society, and universities are places where many of tomorrow's leaders learn how to explore ideas in a way that prepares them to engage in and influence wider society, so it is critical that free speech is secured in universities. A key part of all students' education is the ability to engage in dialogue and contentious debate. Universities have a legal duty under the Education Act to secure freedom of speech within the law, both for students and for visiting speakers.

If we do not prepare students to engage in dialogue in an environment that promotes free speech, there is a serious danger that we will risk promoting extremism and factionalism within wider society. Only by understanding different views and beliefs and by, as one of our witnesses said, countering bad ideas with good ones, will we build community cohesion and break down prejudice and discrimination in wider society, which, at worst, as we know, can lead to violent disturbances within our local communities. That is something that none of us wants. Indeed, it is one of the purposes of the Prevent strategy. It is ironic that the strategy is in many ways defeating one of its key objectives in the way that it is applied at universities. I will come on to that in more detail shortly.

For the record, I will set the legal scene, which the Committee is now well versed in. Article 9 of the European convention on human rights states that,

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.”

Article 10 sets out the right to freedom of speech and a right to,

“hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority”,

and this

“can extend to the right to say things which may...disturb the listener”,

and which the listener might find offensive or even shocking. Free speech is not an absolute right. There are limitations on it to ensure that it is not exercised in a way that causes harm to others by, for example, inciting murder, violence or terrorism or stirring up racial hatred or hatred for other groups, or if it is defamatory or malicious or constitutes harassment. We found that within university settings the inhibitions and restrictions on free speech went much further than that. A number of factors were limiting free speech at universities. I will summarise them briefly, and go into detail about some of them.

As we have heard, there were incidents of unacceptable intimidatory behaviour by protesters intent on preventing free speech and debate. Unnecessary bureaucracy was imposed on those organising events. There was some confusion about what the Prevent duty entailed; for example, some students were frightened about the possibility of being reported for organising or attending events, and of being investigated, as a result, as potentially involved in extremism, which might draw people into terrorism. There was considerable confusion about that.

Other factors were regulatory complexity and confusion, confusion over the Charity Commission guidelines, and unduly complicated and cautious guidance from the Charity Commission itself about what student unions could or could not do in organising events and permitting speakers to attend. Safe space policies were often incorrectly used. Indeed, we did not find the concept of safe space policies helpful at all. It was applied too broadly and vaguely. We found that student unions were inconsistent in the way they applied the regulations on allowing them to hold events at the student union. The different types of group might include faith groups, groups with non-religious views, or groups with views on the Israel-Palestine conflict, right-wing or left-wing views, pro-life or anti-abortion views, and views on transgender issues or Islamophobia. There were many minority views and

[Fiona Bruce]

beliefs—a huge swathe. University authorities’ oversight of the issue, under the legal duty to secure free speech that I mentioned, was inadequate. Another matter of concern was the chilling effect—an undercurrent of restraint among students, both as to their speech as individuals and as to the large number of events either not held at all or inhibited, and of which there was no report, although students wanted them to be held.

Members of the Committee are not aware of one reason why I was concerned to hold the inquiry, which is a personal experience I had at one university. I shall try, in giving examples, not to name the particular university, as I think that might be unhelpful. I had been asked to speak about work I had done in Parliament—so, ironically, it was all in *Hansard*—on sex discrimination in relation to abortion. I was speaking in a room slightly smaller than this Chamber. The back wall was entirely glass windows and on the other side of it was a large courtyard or quad. To my right was one pop-up banner describing the organisation that had invited me to speak—the university Life organisation, on which two small feet were depicted. After I began to speak about what I had done in Parliament, which is on the public record, a university official in uniform came into the room and said, “Your event is causing offence.” There was a startled silence in the room, particularly from me. The official said, “It is causing offence to the students who are sitting in the bar on the other side of the quad.” They could not possibly have heard a word I was saying. It could only have been the sight of the banner. I was certainly saying nothing unlawful at all. We came to a compromise in the end. The official suggested that if we drew the giant curtains across the back of the room, so that the students in the bar could not see what was going on, we could carry on with the event and I could finish my speech. I know that that is not the only time when there has been an endeavour to put restrictions on parliamentarians at universities.

I was concerned about the issue and pleased about the inquiry, because I think the chilling effect and unreported inhibition of speech is far wider than we recognise. Often the chilling effect inhibits students with minority views, and that emboldens students who want to silence or censor views they consider wrong or offensive. I was more convinced about the resultant chilling effect by evidence from Professor Adam Tickell, the vice-chancellor of the University of Sussex. He said he had been unaware of the scale of the problem:

“It was only in preparation for this session that I became aware of the cases”.

Those cases included students being interviewed by Prevent officers, students subsequently telling the student union president that they were afraid to speak their minds, and Muslim students saying they were afraid to go to their campus prayer room. That is evidence from one of our witnesses that there is more to the issue than the public have been aware of for some time.

I join the Committee Chairman, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), in thanking the Minister for the interest he has taken in the issue. He told the Committee that just as important as the evidence of restrictions is

“what is hard to measure: the large number of events that do not happen at all, either because organisers are worried about obstruction

or because the overzealous enforcement of rules makes them seem more trouble than they are worth.”

He added that,

“some of this is quite difficult to gather evidence for.”

I thank the Universities Minister for the lead that he is giving, and for the fact that he told the Committee that he would hold a

“summit to thrash out not only where the responsibilities lie but to make sure that they do not cut across each other and in so doing achieve the opposite of what all these guidelines are meant to achieve, which is to promote free speech.”

I should be interested if the Minister would today update the House on what he is doing to take forward what he said, and how he expects to tackle the issue in the coming months. It has become clear to me as we have examined the issue that it will not be resolved purely by the publication of our report, however important the Committee may think it. We have highlighted an issue that will take considerable tackling by a number of organisations and bodies.

I want to talk in a little more detail about the Charity Commission.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a powerful case, and I am most grateful to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the Chair of the Committee, for the way she led the inquiry.

Does my hon. Friend agree that perhaps universities and, indeed, student unions could take a more proactive role and encourage debate, rather than waiting for debates to come up, and seeing whether they are lawful and whether they should go ahead? They could perhaps take a more overt stance. The range of issues debated in universities is often pretty narrow. I look at the range of debate here and the global concerns about the problems of youth unemployment or, for example, the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo over the last 10 to 20 years, where 6 million people have been killed or died as a result of civil unrest and other disturbances. I rarely see debates in universities on these incredibly important matters. They tend to be confined, albeit on important issues, to a fairly narrow range.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman makes a pertinent point, as always. I will refer back to it in a moment in relation to the Charity Commission’s guidelines. The actual wording of clause 43 of the Education (No. 2) Act 1986 imposes an obligation on university governing bodies to take

“such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured”

on both university and students union premises. I have written underneath, “proactive”. This is a proactive clause. It requires them to take steps to secure free speech, so I entirely agree. It does not help, for example, when, as charities, students unions have been told that they can devote resources to or campaign only on issues that further their charitable purposes. The Charity Commission has interpreted this—I think, and our Committee agrees—in a far too narrow way. The Charity Commission guidance for students unions indicated that it would consider it acceptable for charitable students unions to comment on

“street lighting near the campus”

because the issue affects students as students, and therefore fulfils their charitable purposes. The Charity Commission would consider it unacceptable for students unions to comment publicly on issues that do not directly affect the welfare of students as students, such as,

“the treatment of political prisoners in a foreign country.”

That is the Charity Commission’s own example, illustrating the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford.

The Minister told our Committee that the Charity Commission guidance should

“go further and facilitate the promotion of free speech. It should be giving students’ unions the permission to host debates about controversial issues and expose students to a wide range of viewpoints. That should be the core purpose.”

That is quite right. It is not just preferable that free speech is promoted and protected in universities. It should be a prerequisite for any university that is going to achieve its educational purposes. I am pleased that the Charity Commission has acknowledged as much this week and has announced in response to our report that it will create new guidance in this area. Helen Stephenson, chief executive of the Charity Commission said yesterday:

“charitable students’ unions, universities and other higher education providers can challenge traditional boundaries, encourage the free exchange of views and host speakers with a range of opinions, including those who might be controversial or divide opinion.

These activities are entirely in line with their aims to promote education.”

That is a pleasing response to our report.

Jeremy Lefroy: I believe this year is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx. He was born in Trier in Germany. He was effectively expelled from Germany because he was the editor of a newspaper that exercised the right of free speech. For those students perhaps slightly to the left of some of us here today, I point to the example of Karl Marx, who was the victim of university or town authorities in Trier, because he wanted to exercise free speech. From whatever political point we look at it, free speech is absolutely vital to secure the rights of individual citizens, as he was trying to do in that case.

Fiona Bruce: That is an excellent example. I hope it will also encourage students to the right of Karl Marx, because I have spoken to a number of students who have recently said, “I wouldn’t admit to being a conservative on campus.”

Our Committee concluded that the concept of safe spaces, having been extended to entire university campuses, is unhelpful. It is not only unhelpful. If minority views are suppressed across the whole campus, but they are not views that are promoting terrorism or inciting the kind of activity I referred to earlier, the concept is actually against the law, impinging on the right to free speech under article 10 of the European convention on human rights. A number of students unions tried to argue in evidence to us that it was necessary to limit speakers who cause harm through speech—harm caused because people might find speech disturbing or upsetting. As our report says, however, this is counter or detrimental to free speech. Regarding safe spaces, we say:

“Whilst there must be opportunities for genuinely sensitive and confidential discussions in university settings, and whilst the original intention behind safe space policies may have been to

ensure that minority or vulnerable groups can feel secure, in practice the concept of safe spaces has proved problematic, often marginalising the views of minority groups. They need to co-exist with and respect free speech. They cannot cover the whole of the university or university life without impinging on rights to free speech...When that happens, people are moving from the need to have a “safe space” to seeking to prevent the free speech of those whose views they disagree with. Minority groups or individuals holding unpopular opinions which are within the law should not be shut down nor be subject to undue additional scrutiny by students’ unions or universities.”

I hope that university authorities will take careful note of that.

On the Prevent strategy, we had quite some evidence. I want to reiterate what the guidance says. As our report states, under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, the guidance states that higher education bodies,

“when deciding whether or not to host a particular speaker...should consider carefully whether the views being expressed...constitute extremist views that risk drawing people into terrorism or are shared by terrorist groups.”

Those are important words—“risk drawing people into terrorism or are shared by terrorist groups”—if a little wide, but the issue of terrorism is critical. The guidance goes on:

“In these circumstances the event should not be allowed to proceed except where”

the educational bodies

“are entirely convinced that such risk can be fully mitigated”.

That is the legal position, but I will also cite some of the evidence we received about that and about hate speech.

An organisation called CARE, Christian Action Research and Education, stated:

“One common occurrence is that certain speakers who are perceived as ‘extremist’ are being denied the chance to speak at universities, to discuss their ideas, and have their ideas challenged by others in an open debate. First, this drives any such ideas underground. Second, the definition of extremism, as identified in the Counter Extremism Strategy...is very broad, incorporates non-violent as well as violent forms of extremism, and does not necessarily relate back to the concept of terrorism. In his recent judgment in the case of Mr Salman Butt, Ouseley J confirmed that the Prevent duty is a duty to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and does not refer to all forms of extremism...Nonetheless, no steps have been taken by the Government to confirm the correct interpretation and scope of the definition of what constitutes ‘extremism’ and its impact on the Prevent duty.”

Some student groups, for example, have been prevented from holding events because the Church from which the speaker comes is considered fundamentalist or, in other words, extreme. Such an individual has not the slightest intention of drawing people into terrorism. I ask the Minister and his colleagues to look again at the counter-extremism strategy to ensure that its broad definition of extremism, which has been used by some universities, is not used to prevent free speech at universities.

Hate speech results from the use of threatening, abusive or insulting words, or the displaying of written material that is threatening, abusive or insulting and therefore intended to cause the person harassment, alarm or distress, or to stir up racial hatred. Although that is the definition of hate speech, and, as we were told in evidence,

“it is meant to be used narrowly in relation to any speech that fulfils the particulars under the Public Order Act 1986...over time, the phrase has become embedded into everyday language to describe any statement that some may find ‘offensive’.”

[Fiona Bruce]

At universities, there is an increasing tendency to conflate offensive speech with hate speech, which

“has resulted in a far greater willingness to countenance censorship.”

Several pieces of evidence to our inquiry showed that that was the case. As a result of those common misunderstandings, freedom of speech at universities has suffered. I would be grateful if the Minister looked at CARE’s evidence to the inquiry in particular, so that an appropriate application can be made in universities.

I will give a few examples of the kinds of issues that were mentioned to us in evidence. We were told of a university that introduced “emotional risk assessments” in December 2016 that were used in an “invasive and heavy-handed way”. They have resulted in the students’ association telling student groups

“what they can and can’t do and say”.

In some cases, all of a student group’s activities, including weekly meetings, events and emails, that were to be sent to outside students or speakers had to be approved in advance by the students association. That meant that one or two people in the students’ association office could basically make the operations of that student group impossible. For example, they rejected events because they were “too provocative” and they would not allow discussions that made specific reference to the Manchester terrorist attack or Hurricane Gregory, in case those specific incidents of suffering caused upset.

Another group was not allowed to have a stand at a freshers’ fair unless it was unmanned. A group at another university was told that it had to provide the name of any invited speaker, the topic and an outline of their talk 21 days in advance of the event.

We were told that at other universities there was a culture not only of safe spaces and hurtful speech but of trigger warnings:

“Students are encouraged to catastrophise when they hear something controversial or challenging rather than to engage with new ideas robustly.”

That is hardly a preparation for the world of work.

An ethics society was told that it could not hold an event because it would be asking for volunteers during it, and that contravened university policy guidelines. On further inspection, it was found that no such guidelines existed within the union or the university. Another group was told that it would be refused affiliation with the students union on the grounds that it was

“violating union policies regarding discrimination and equal opportunity”,

but on reading the union policy, no such violation was found. Several groups, particularly pro-life groups, were prevented from holding events or exhibiting material at freshers’ fairs that, on further investigation, was found to be used in primary schools and in further education material.

There are real problems for many groups in arranging external speakers and organising events. The Alliance of Pro-Life Students said that,

“pro-life societies are often given undue burden to host events”

and are

“subject to mediations to which other societies are not”.

Humanist groups said that student unions and universities, “repeatedly shut down expressive conduct deemed by them to be wrong, offensive, or harmful, particularly with regards to criticism of religious beliefs”.

Such groups told us that,

“student unions were making arbitrary decisions about the views to which students should be exposed.”

They say that “many student unions” do not have clear or coherent democratic policies in place, which means that voting in a certain way, or no-platforming, or getting

“safe space policies into official union policy is surprisingly easy. If unions had better guidelines for democratic policies, and their union officials faced actual sanctions for disregarding freedom of speech, the union, and therefore the university environments, would become both more democratic and more open to diverse viewpoints.”

As I have said before, the issue will not be resolved overnight. I am encouraged that the Minister is determined to address it. It is clear that since our report more instances have come to light. For example, a colleague on the Committee received an email from UK Lawyers for Israel this week that expressed a number of concerns about specific policies on university campuses, including ticketing requirements and restrictions on advertising. It says that, although our report mentions that some pro-Israel events were disrupted, that happens on many occasions. The impact of such disruptions can be not only burdensome regulations and requirements for future events; the cost, time and administrative burden, and the need to protect people from hostile protests leaves students who run such societies exhausted and put off from hosting events. In an echo of another of our comments, UK Lawyers for Israel said that universities must impose penalties on students who incite, encourage or participate in the disruption of meetings.

It is a very full report; there is much more to it. I thank the Minister for his interest and look forward to his response and future action.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Hon. Members may be interested to know that I plan to start the wind-ups at 4 pm.

3.48 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I rise to speak as a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and it is a pleasure to do so. I have greatly enjoyed my brief time on the Committee, and I thank and congratulate our Chair, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), on her leadership and on bringing together an important and timely report.

The Committee has recently been debating the extent to which everyone in the country feels that they can identify with the language and existence of rights. Even for those who do not immediately speak the language of rights or who do not think within a legal framework of rights, the right to freedom of speech immediately resonates. Our right to stand up and say what we like within the law and in the way we choose is entirely central to how we live our personal and political lives. To feel that that right may be being inhibited in universities is particularly worrying. I say that as someone who taught for a number of years at King’s College London

and also taught at the University of Leicester; I did both very happily. I never came across anything of the like that we have discussed in this report, but those were simpler times.

The truth is that, as the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham laid out so clearly, we have a problem in some of our universities in the way in which students' right to free speech is being inhibited. There are three basic methods by which it is being inhibited, which have been discussed by my colleagues, and of course they are: protest, shutting freedom of speech down; political attitudes of no-platforming that prevent people from being heard; and an unhelpful risk-averse bureaucracy, which is jamming up the process of holding events altogether.

It is particularly pertinent in the framework of university life that these problems are occurring, because "university"—the word itself—is intended to encompass everything, and to be open and broad, bringing in a range of views and people, in order to extend the learning and experience of those who come through it. Yet in too many cases we see the signs of a changing attitude that is preventing that from being the case.

It is obviously the case that protest itself is a form of freedom of speech, right up to the point where it inhibits somebody else's right to express themselves. Cases were brought to our Committee's attention. In particular, in what is now a reasonably famous case from, I regret to say, King's College London—a university where I taught—masked protesters broke into a peaceful debate and set off smoke alarms, so that the building had to be evacuated, which completely shut down the discussion that was going on. That is absolutely unacceptable in the moment, but it has even greater ramifications because, of course, once a student event has been disrupted, at cost to the student body and to the university, those carrying out a risk assessment of such events in the future will take a much harder line. That means that every protest of that kind endangers the freedom of speech at future events.

Much the same is true with no-platforming. We were told that there were actually very few registered cases of individuals being no-platformed. However, once a policy of no-platforming on a particular issue is established, it means that there will not even be a discussion as to whether people should discuss that issue, because if they do not conform to the strictures laid down by the university or the student body they will not even have a chance to be no-platformed, because they will not even be considered as potential speakers.

We must encourage students and those working in universities to remember that if someone stands on a platform and breaks the law by giving a speech, it is the speaker themselves who is culpable; it is not automatically the student body or the university that must carry the can. Of course, if a speaker has previously broken the law and it is possible that they might use their platform to do the same thing again, that puts the university or student body in a slightly different area. However, ultimate responsibility must lie with the people who express such views, not with their audience or the organisers of the event. It is that which we need to be mindful of.

I completely concur with the statement by the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham that we cannot expect speakers to have to submit their

speeches in advance if they have never done anything wrong before. There is the example of the journalist Peter Hitchens being asked to submit his speech before he spoke to a student body as a prerequisite to his being able to stand on a platform. That can only be a veiled form of censorship.

Lastly, I turn to the bureaucratic process itself. I am a Conservative and so people would not expect me to stand up and extoll the virtues of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is a little bit like jam; a little bit of is very good and very effective, but three pints of it is too much. So we find with the examples that we have seen from a number of universities where there is an excess of risk aversion.

What really happens through such byzantine processes is an attempt to prevent anything vaguely risky from happening, and in my experience that is not the purpose of university life. Indeed, university life is a time to take risks, experience new things and hear new thoughts. I say to the people who find themselves in this situation and pondering these issues in universities that there is absolutely no contradiction between adhering strictly to one's own world-view and having an open mind. Unfortunately, awareness of that fact has been lost.

I commend to the Minister the recommendations that our Committee made. I am very pleased to hear that he held a summit—I think it was on 3 May—that brought together the National Union of Students, the Charity Commission and a number of other relevant bodies, at which this bureaucratic issue was discussed. I hope that our Committee's report was part of the discussions then, and that those present were able to consider the principles that we have pulled together as a very simple legal and—I believe—effective way of ascertaining whether an event is acceptable.

The first point we make is that everyone has the right to freedom of speech within the law; the second is that universities should seek to expose their members and students to the widest possible range of views, while ensuring that they act within the law; the third is that if a speaker breaks the law, it is the speaker themselves who is culpable; and the fourth is that protest itself is a legitimate expression of freedom of speech.

With all that in mind, and as long as there is a clear and clean system of redress for those who feel that any of those principles are being inhibited, we will have a much better framework to ensure that students do not find themselves having to worry about the events they attend or the events they are holding, or having to worry about being unable to stand up for what they believe in.

I second the remarks made by my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) that there is a danger—albeit a danger that I do not believe is currently very present in many of our universities—that we encourage a sort of intellectual monoculture in certain places, which would be the physical equivalent of the echo chamber that we hear about among groups on Twitter, whereby people only listen to their own views and only get feedback from people who are in broadly the same position as themselves, and whereby it might be considered acceptable to invite only four or five speakers from the same political party during the course of a year. I do not believe that that is in the spirit of a university education.

[Alex Burghart]

I end with one perhaps slightly over-dramatic quotation, which was written on the donors' board in the old library at my university. I will spare everyone the Latin, but it is a quotation from the Book of Daniel:

"Many shall pass by and knowledge will be multiplied."

We cannot hope for knowledge to be multiplied unless a plurality and a multitude of views are expressed and heard within our universities.

3.59 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. It is also a pleasure to speak to this report. I commend the Committee for it. It is a very interesting read, and I am pleased to hear that the Minister and the Charity Commission in England will pay some attention to its recommendations. I look forward to hearing the Minister's speech later.

I was pleased to hear from all the members of the Committee who have spoken so far that they, too, agree that universities should be places of debate and discussion, disagreement and dispute. It is only by disputing the status quo that knowledge moves on, that the sum total of human knowledge is expanded, and that we learn more. Academic freedom, university autonomy and the right of scholars to think and do and say as they will are essential elements of universities. They are indispensable if we want to see universities be universities, and if we want the benefits to society that come from having universities.

The right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) reminded us of how heated debate has always been part of university life. It certainly figured in my time as a student. Representing Edinburgh North and Leith, I must mention the role that academic freedom and freedom of speech played in the Enlightenment. Those freedoms were so important in incubating the freedom of thought and the rebellion against orthodoxy that underpinned the expansive thoughts of Enlightenment figures. Without those freedoms, we would not have had that Enlightenment, and we would not have the world as we know it today. Free speech has created our world and continues to create it anew.

In that context, I am pleased that universities in Scotland seem to be maintaining those freedoms rather well, and that the Scottish approach to regulation appears to be more effective than the rather heavily laden approach being taken in England. I was certainly pleased to hear from the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) that England's Charity Commission is now agreeing to reissue guidance. That was certainly something that figured heavily in the report. It is clear that students and university bodies are finding things confusing, to say the least.

Freedom of speech is not an indivisible right. It does not sit alone and gleaming like some immutable, omnipotent deity. It does not exist outside of human interaction or outside of society. There is no free speech without stout defence of it and without rational and reasonable care taken of the privilege. There is no free speech where we allow hate speech. Those repressed by the violence of hatred are not free to speak. Those cowed by hate speech aimed at others are not free to speak. Those practising hate speech are not speaking; they are shouting so

loudly that they are excluding other voices. Hate speech is the enemy of free speech, and we should not allow it. That does not mean, however—many Members have made this point—that we should ban speakers we do not like or intimidate their supporters. The example given by the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham was upsetting. It is depressing to think that people think they can force their opinions on others in that way or intimidate them in that way. Masked protesters are no better. Intimidation does not defeat hatred; it inflames it.

Our defence of free speech, and of the privilege of discussing possibly awkward topics, has to be stronger and more open. The report goes a long way towards making that possible, in a way. Our defence against hatred has to be rooted in a society that will not accept it, and in a broadside of opinion that says that tolerance and patience are virtues that we value, and that stand above personal advantage or tribal instincts.

I certainly had great sympathy with what the right hon. and learned Lady said on safe spaces and on free speech in universities. Safe spaces exclude people as much as, if not more than, they protect people. Closing down debate by protest, exclusion or intimidation is censorship by the mob and cannot, in any mind, be the way in which we would want universities to function. Is it really the message that we want the students of today to learn? Do we want to say that the safest way of dealing with ideas that we find distasteful, opinions we dislike and people whose views we find abhorrent is to ignore them, shut them out and think that they will have no further effect on us? That surely would not be a sensible thing for them to think, and I think that there are significant parallels to be drawn with the Prevent legislation since it, too, appears to suggest that bad things will go away if we do not look at them.

It cannot only be me—it clearly is not—who looks at the effects of the Prevent legislation on our universities and questions how effective it is. As outlined in the report, having universities and student unions jumping through hoops to satisfy regulators about events on their premises is hardly likely to be the greatest blow any terrorist group has ever faced. It is only 20 years since the Good Friday agreement was made. That ended the troubles by rational means, and I cannot believe we have forgotten that it was not achieved by closing down debate in universities. In fact, some people might remember that a previous Government sought to deny "the oxygen of publicity". That was a farcical policy, which did nothing to address the underlying issues.

Vetting the thousands and thousands of speakers who present in universities every year is not a solution, or even a partial one. Cairncross, Blunt, Maclean, Burgess and Philby did not need a "Moscow is swell" event at Cambridge to persuade them. The time and effort spent by universities and student unions on monitoring and adjudicating on events seems to me to be wasted. In my view, positive relationships between communities and public organisations are the key to preventing recruitment and radicalisation. That takes time and effort; it takes years and years of building trust, and it is far too easily destroyed by careless comments and attitudes.

I recommend Scotland's approach on this to England's regulators and policy makers. Do it in a spirit of seeking mutual benefit, and that is what you will move towards. To the students, let us say, "Do as you will. Attend meetings

or don't, listen to speakers or don't, but engage in the debates; think for yourselves. This is a time of your life that, as we all know, passes all too quickly. Suck it in, soak it up, make it count and enjoy it. And in the meantime, tell Government to back off—they always need to be told."

4.6 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry, and it is a great privilege and honour to follow the introduction of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who so eloquently presented the conclusions of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. I also pay tribute to the Committee members present—the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who spoke so thoughtfully.

I am here because I am the Opposition spokesperson and therefore have to respond to the debate, but I hope that I also bring other things to it. Having long been a member of Select Committees in the past—particularly education Committees—I appreciate the importance of the evidence-driven process, rather than obiter dicta being floated out sometimes, to be massaged and expanded by the mainstream media. All politicians want to get our message across, and some of us succumb rather too rapidly to that temptation.

I also come to the debate bearing many of the tenets that I was taught, including the process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Historians are told to look at those things, but students of many other humanities disciplines depend on them, too. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for reminding us of the importance of the Enlightenment; the Scottish Enlightenment, in particular, played a part in that process. The classic statement of Enlightenment libertarianism—I will not quote it completely accurately—was by Voltaire and went something like, "I might hugely disagree with your opinions, but I will defend to the death your right to express them."

Those are important principles. It is very good that the Joint Committee's report, although it did not give us a great historical exegesis, went right back to some of those first principles and, importantly, to the Education (No. 2) Act 1986, which forms a useful context for its proposals.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham was absolutely right, and not in any way immodest, to say that the members of her Committee have a hugely broad area of experience. Inevitably, not all Select Committees can have that. From that point of view, it is incumbent on us all, whether in government or in opposition, to carefully examine what has been said. For my part, I think the members of the Committee have delivered an admirable synthesis, in fairly crisp and straightforward terms. With all those lawyers, it would have been very easy to get bogged down in lots of legal terms. The test is whether someone outside the legal world could pick up that document and find it useful, helpful and understandable. I think they could.

My right hon. and learned Friend talked about context. Context is important. We are all tempted, from time to time, to go off into flights of philosophical fancy and great principles, but we need to come back to context from time to time. She drew briefly on her time at

university. I was at university slightly later than she was. I was at Oxford, which is always a little behind everybody else on some of its revolutionary activities. In fact, when I arrived in 1973, I found that we were in the process of occupying university buildings to get a student union—something that had been discussed and argued about some five years earlier in other universities—but I will let that pass.

Context is important. This year, we mark the 50th anniversary of two sets of activities—one involving students, the other involving free speech—that importantly changed our world. One of them, of course, was the wide-scale student protests in the 1960s. Baroness Bakewell, a Member of the upper House, only the other week presented a marvellous programme on television about the context of the French *événements* in that respect, and how they changed French society. In that same year, 1968, Enoch Powell gave his infamous "rivers of blood" speech. Both those events still have resonance for us today when discussing what the bounds to student protests and to free speech should be. Those are important layers of context.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham was absolutely right to say that context changes the things that students, or the general public, want to talk about. Without disrespect to the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who is no longer in his place, I am suspicious of the idea that we can tell universities, "You should be talking about this, that and the other." Students will talk about what students want to talk about. There may be more bread and butter discussed today at some points than there would have been when my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham and I were at university, but the crucial thing is that there should be spaces in which a broad number have that ability to talk. I am suspicious of the idea that we—particularly those of us who are perhaps rather more removed from their student days than others—should pontificate about what student unions should do, or choose to do. I think that way sometimes madness lies.

The report rightly talked about the potential dead hand of bureaucracy and inhibition. Sometimes, with the best will in the world, institutions and stakeholders get excited by the project and go ahead to develop things that sound thoughtful, but end up in an horrendous organigram, such as the one that my right hon. and learned Friend showed us. None of us is immune from that, but we need from time to time to cut away at it and, indeed, to make fun of it. When we were talking about bureaucracy I was reminded, as an historian, of the famous phrase in Philip II's empire, "If death came from Madrid, I would be immortal." That sense of bureaucracies or powers bringing those things to themselves and thinking that they have all the answers can produce that sort of position. It is reasonably clear where the boundary lies of breaching the right to free speech, and the example that my right hon. and learned Friend gave in that respect is a very important one.

I will touch briefly on the comments by the hon. Members for Congleton and for Brentwood and Ongar. The hon. Member for Congleton laid out well some of the ridiculousness of the hokey cokey of regulations. The particular account she gave of the curtains reminded me of the famous phrase in "Measure for Measure", "man, proud man,

[Gordon Marsden]

Drest in a little brief authority”.

It happened to be a man in that case, and presumably it was on the occasion that the hon. Lady mentioned. Sometimes people get off on that sort of thing. While I welcome the Charity Commission’s response to the report, I do not think it is immune to that either. The examples that the hon. Lady gave reminded me—to take a medieval parallel—of scholastics trying to decide how many angels could dance on a pin.

The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar talked about rights and about the law. I am sympathetic to that, but we must all remember that the law itself is not an immutable concept. The laws, from time to time, disadvantage citizens in our society and need to be challenged. Some 50 years ago, gay people in this country were mildly celebrating the passage of the Sexual Offences Act 1967. Principles are not always the same. If we look up at the screen today, what is being debated in the other Chamber? Homophobia, transphobia and biphobia. We might have different views on the importance of those relevant to other things, but context changes things.

It is important that we have those things in mind. We have heard today that there is not a pervasive problem of freedom of speech at our universities, and that some of the press accounts of widespread suppression of free speech have been out of kilter with reality. The Committee members did not find the wholesale censorship of debate that media coverage had suggested. That is not to say that the report does not draw attention to a number of important factors limiting free speech, and there is inevitably real confusion about how regulations apply to student unions. That is why it was important that the Committee undertook its student union survey, which showed that 25 out of 33 student union officers said that restriction of free speech was not a problem at their university.

Fiona Bruce: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gordon Marsden: I will not, I am afraid. I have little enough time to speak, so I will continue.

The chief executive of Universities UK recently said:

“Tens of thousands of speaking events are put on every year across the country, the majority pass without incident.”

It was a little curious that the Minister’s predecessor, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), repeatedly expressed concerns about some of the impacts of student-led activities, such as no-platforming and safe spaces, in—in my view—a slightly lurid fashion. There is a clear line between frank speech and what whips up and can specifically promote hate, or be abusive. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham touched on that.

It is also important that we consider the role of Government and other organisations in this process. The National Union of Students has a no-platform policy for a handful of racist, anti-Semitic and extremist organisations, some of which the Government themselves have banned. Is the Minister opposed to that policy? How clear does he need to be about which of those groups he wants to see on campus?

Earlier this month, as we have heard, the Minister set out some proposals and thoughts. I think he felt a little constrained about what he could say because of the views of his predecessor. Bringing together that group,

as he did, is potentially a productive mechanism. Can he spell out some of the conclusions of the summit and, as importantly, who is to be held accountable for taking them forward? The Government must not try to micromanage free speech on our university campuses; some of the problems raised by this report need addressing, but they will not necessarily be addressed by micromanagement from Government.

Finally, I come to the implications. Academics of both right and left persuasions have always and often been arresting and controversial figures, so it is important that the broader questions about academic autonomy and freedom are recognised by the Government. Throughout the passage of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, the Opposition were clear that the new Office for Students should not be a micromanagement process for this. In terms of this activity, what does the Minister believe his responsibilities are, as opposed to those of the Office for Students, in terms of drawing up guidelines? If they are too widely drawn, they will produce some of the problems we have heard about today.

This is an excellent report, and I commend it. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham talked about the fact that the Committee had saved the Government a lot of time; I would also say money and possibly civil service time. Although I know very well that civil servants are loth to take anything simply as is, I suggest that the report could be a very important blueprint for solving some of the inevitable tensions and dilemmas in this area.

4.20 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) on securing the debate and thank everyone who has contributed to it.

Like the Joint Committee, I approached this issue with a fairly open mind. That said, I have a bent, so far as free speech is concerned. As president of the debating society at university, I was totally happy to countenance inviting a senior member of the British National party to come and speak, even though I found, and still find, his views abhorrent, because I felt that the only way to deal with them was to challenge him. I invited Tariq Aziz, who was then the Iraqi Foreign Minister, but he was no-platformed by the Home Office at the time, so my members had to make do with Mark Owen from Take That instead.

I came to this with an open mind, but I clearly started from a position that free speech should be encouraged. We live in an open society and open debate is particularly important. If our democracy is to flourish, someone having views that are offensive to someone else is not sufficient reason to prevent them expressing those views—but expressing them does not mean that they should go unchallenged. Rather than trying to stop that person expressing such views, what we want is open debate.

I also approached the debate very conscious that, today, a word or a couple of words in a sentence that someone utters can completely characterise and define their position. It is easy, as universities go through these issues, to get to a point where they might think that someone is an unacceptable speaker because of how

their views have been represented. They react to how the views have been presented, rather than listening to the argument. For all those reasons, it is important to be cautious in how we approach the issue.

When I appeared before the Joint Committee, four or five weeks into this job, I carefully calibrated how I expressed my position: I not only expressed concern about a creeping culture of censorship, but suggested that measuring whether we have free speech on campus by events that happen is not in itself sufficient. We do not know about the events that do not happen or, more importantly, about the events that happen but in a different way from how they would have happened had they been able to go ahead freely.

As Universities Minister, I have been going around universities speaking directly to students. I found it slightly amusing that, before I spoke at one university—the Universities Minister doing a Q&A with students—they had to read out the safe space policy. I just had to smile. I visited another university to discuss a number of issues, including free speech, and it was suggested to my team that, if we really wanted negative headlines, we should go ahead. I said, “Why don’t you invite lots of students from other universities nearby? You have the Universities Minister, and it would be good for them to be involved.” They said that they couldn’t invite them because they thought they would cause trouble. They were going to manage the invitation list. A video had to be played at the start of the event. As I spoke to my team about it, I ended up asking myself whether it was really worth doing the event at all. That is how censorship happens. I could see that I was second-guessing myself and what I was going to say. I am the Universities Minister. I hope that I might have some controversial views, but hopefully none that are sufficient for me to be turned away from speaking at any of our universities.

It is based on that experience, and the number of letters that I now receive from students across the country, that I have come to the view that the Committee is actually on to something here, in two important respects. The first is the bureaucracy and rules around free speech, whether from equalities law, the Charity Commission, which regulates student unions, or a university’s own policies, or a particular student union’s own policies. At best, it is so confusing that a well-intentioned person could somehow end up seeing censorship as the way to promote free speech, which is a contradiction in terms. At worst, it is very easy for wreckers to use that bureaucracy to frustrate views that they do not agree with and do not think belong on campus.

The Committee is not only on to something really significant here, but its work, which is even-handed and level-headed in its approach, provides a very good basis on which to proceed. It is a cross-party Committee and it has members from both Houses; it is not the Government party trying to use free speech as a wedge—that is the last thing I want to do. Free speech on campus should not be seen as a proxy for some of the wider culture wars in our society. If anything, it should be about helping universities with what they are best placed to do: fostering open debate and the free exchange of ideas. There are often clashes, but those clashes should be seen as positive, rather than something we want to rail against or stop.

I very much welcome the Committee’s report and its recommendations. I have been a Minister for a number of years now. When Ministers receive Select Committee

reports, we often spend our time scratching our heads and thinking how to respond by doing the least we can and then moving on. However, this report provides a very strong basis for the Government to do what we can to promote free speech. That is why I held a summit, attended by the National Union of Students, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the Office for Students and the Charity Commission, so that we could all work together to resolve this issue in a way that works for all our universities.

The Committee has thankfully come up with not only a set of recommendations, but its own guidance. We are looking to produce uniform and simplified guidance, and the Committee’s work means that we can proceed in haste to produce that for the start of the next academic year.

Gordon Marsden: I apologise for interrupting the Minister while he is in full flow. On the summit, which was advertised and which we are told went well, it would be helpful to both Members and the Joint Committee if he could provide a synopsis of what was actually agreed and who was tasked with doing some of those things.

Mr Gyimah: Absolutely. I will write to the Committee and I am willing to share that correspondence with the hon. Gentleman. It will include how the Government plan to proceed with the recommendations and the outcome of the summit. The Equality and Human Rights Commission holds the pen on the new guidance and regulations, so it will drive it, rather than Ministers or officials in Whitehall.

The Committee is on to something in highlighting overlapping and confusing regulations that frustrate, rather than promote, free speech. It mentioned the role of the Office for Students. Because the debate is almost out of time, I will set that out clearly in my follow-up correspondence.

I will mention something that I do not think the Committee touched on: the issue of culture. My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) touched on the risk of a political monoculture developing on our campuses, so that, by default, certain ideas are seen as unacceptable. If free speech is to work, the same standards should be applied to all ideas, rather than believing that certain ideas should not be held because they are unpopular or unfashionable. Nigel Farage should be as welcome on campus as Jon Lansman, for example.

I also think that protest has a place. We want active debate, but we also want active and peaceful protest. However, protest becomes unacceptable when it is a deliberate attempt to prevent an event from taking place because the protestors disagree with the ideas that will be aired there. This is very difficult to solve, and it is one area that the Committee did not look at, but we really need to tackle it in order to ensure that our universities truly are bastions of free speech.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, Freedom of Speech in Universities, HC 589.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 17 May 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Policy

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) and I wish to reiterate the Government's view that there are potentially substantial benefits from the safe and sustainable exploration and development of our onshore shale gas resources and to set out in this statement to Parliament the actions we are taking to support our position. This joint statement should be considered in planning decisions and plan making in England.

The UK must have safe, secure and affordable supplies of energy with carbon emissions levels that are consistent with the carbon budgets defined in our Climate Change Act and our international obligations. We believe that gas has a key part to play in meeting these objectives both currently and in the future. In part as a result of the UK's diverse range of energy sources, which include natural gas, we have had competitively priced energy since 1990 while reducing carbon emissions across the economy by 49%—a leading performance among developed nations. Gas still makes up around a third of our current energy usage and every scenario proposed by the Committee on Climate Change setting out how the UK could meet its legally binding 2050 emissions reduction target includes demand for natural gas. As set out in the clean growth strategy, innovations in technologies such as carbon capture usage and storage (CCUS) have the potential to decarbonise this energy supply still further and prolong its role in our energy mix.

However, despite the welcome improvements in efficiency and innovation from companies operating in the North sea, the ongoing decline in our offshore gas production has meant that the UK has gone from being a net exporter of gas in 2003 to importing over half (53%) of gas supplies in 2017 and estimates suggest we could be importing 72% of our gas by 2030. Our current import mix, via pipelines from Norway and continental Europe and LNG terminals that can source gas from around the world, provides us with stable and secure supplies. However, we believe that it is right to utilise our domestic gas resources to the maximum extent and exploring further the potential for onshore gas production from shale rock formations in the UK, where it is economically efficient, and where environmental impacts are robustly regulated.

We also believe that further development of onshore gas resources has the potential to deliver substantial economic benefits to the UK economy and for local communities where supplies are located by creating thousands of new jobs directly in extraction, local support services, and the rest of the supply chain. A potential new shale gas exploration and production sector in the shale basins of England could provide a new economic driver. We also see an opportunity to

work with industry on innovation to create a “UK Model”—the world's most environmentally robust onshore shale gas sector—and to explore export opportunities from this model, a core theme of our modern industrial strategy.

But to achieve these benefits, we need to work with responsible companies prepared to invest in this industry as they proceed with the exploration process, to test the size and value of the potential reserves and to ensure that our planning and regulatory systems work appropriately while assisting local councils in making informed and appropriate planning decisions. So we are setting out a series of actions, including those committed to in the Government's 2017 manifesto to support the development of shale gas extraction.

PLANNING

The UK has world-class regulation to ensure that shale exploration can happen safely, respecting local communities and safeguarding the environment. The development of the shale gas industry so far has already led to millions of pounds being invested in the UK, supporting businesses and the supply chain, and creating British jobs. We have recently seen four planning approvals for exploratory shale development. The Government remain fully committed to making planning decisions faster and fairer for all those affected by new development, and to ensure that local communities are fully involved in planning decisions that affect them. These are long-standing principles. No one benefits from the uncertainty caused by delay which is why, in September 2015, Government set out a range of measures to help ensure every planning application or appeal was dealt with as quickly as possible.

However, recent decisions on shale exploration planning applications remain disappointingly slow against a statutory time frame of 16 weeks where an environmental impact assessment is required. So we are announcing a range of measures to facilitate timely decisions. These measures only apply in England.

Planning policy and guidance

This statement is a material consideration in plan making and decision taking, alongside relevant policies of the existing national planning policy framework (2012), in particular those on mineral planning, including conventional and unconventional hydrocarbons.

Shale gas development is of national importance. The Government expect mineral planning authorities to give great weight to the benefits of mineral extraction, including to the economy. This includes shale gas exploration and extraction. Mineral plans should reflect that minerals resources can only be worked where they are found, and applications must be assessed on a site by site basis and having regard to their context. Plans should not set restrictions or thresholds across their plan area that limit shale development without proper justification. We expect mineral planning authorities to recognise the fact that Parliament has set out in statute the relevant definitions of hydrocarbon, natural gas and associated hydraulic fracturing. In addition, these matters are described in planning practice guidance, which plans must have due regard to. Consistent with this planning practice guidance, policies should avoid undue sterilisation of mineral resources, including shale gas.

The Government have consulted on a draft revised national planning policy framework (NPPF). The consultation closed on 10 May 2018. In due course the revised national planning policy framework will sit alongside the written ministerial statement.

We intend to publish revised planning practice guidance on shale development once the revised national planning policy framework has been launched ensuring clarity on issues such as cumulative impact, local plan making and confirmation that planners can rely on the advice of regulatory experts.

Planning decision making

To support a decision-making regime that meets the future needs of the sector we will progress our manifesto commitments by:

Holding an early-stage consultation, in summer 2018, on the principle of whether non-hydraulic fracturing shale exploration development should be treated as permitted development, and in particular on the circumstances in which this might be appropriate.

Consulting, in summer 2018, on the criteria required to trigger the inclusion of shale production projects into the nationally significant infrastructure projects regime.

Further, we will strengthen community engagement by consulting in due course on the potential to make pre-application consultation a statutory requirement.

Support for those involved in decision making

We are aware that the shale applications and the planning process can be complex for local authorities. Building capacity and capability within local authorities to deal with shale development is a vital step towards speeding up decision making. We will help achieve this by announcing today:

The launch of a new £1.6 million shale support fund over the next two years to build capacity and capability in local authorities dealing with shale applications.

The creation of a new planning brokerage service for shale applications to provide guidance to developers and local authorities on the planning process to help facilitate timely decision making. The service would focus exclusively on the planning process and will have no role in the consideration or determination of planning applications. The service will not comment on the merits of a case and will also have no role in the appeals process.

In addition, the Government recognise that early engagement with local authorities, including capitalising on formal pre-application discussions, is critical in building confidence in decision making and securing support for development proposals and set realistic timeframes for decisions. We expect this to be formalised by a planning performance agreement providing certainty for all parties. And we then expect all parties—including decision makers in local authorities—to stick to the timetable.

Opportunities for redress

While we are confident that the measures announced in this written ministerial statement will speed up decision making on shale applications, we cannot be complacent. Therefore:

We will continue to treat appeals against any refusal of planning permission for exploring and developing shale gas, or against any non-determination as a priority for urgent determination by the planning inspectorate, making additional resources available where necessary.

Under the written ministerial statement in 2015 the criteria for recovering planning appeals were amended to include proposals for exploring and developing shale gas. This was applied for a two-year period subject to further review.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has conducted a review and remains committed to scrutinising appeals for these proposals. We are therefore announcing that the criteria for considering the recovery of planning appeals are continued for a further two years. The new criterion is added to the recovery policy of 30 June 2008, *Official Report*, column 43WS.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government will actively consider calling in shale applications particularly where statutory deadlines have been exceeded. Each case will be considered on its facts in line with his policy. Priority timeframes for urgent determination will be given to any called-in applications.

The Government continue to commit to identifying underperforming local planning authorities that repeatedly fail to determine oil and gas applications within statutory timeframes. When any future applications are made to underperforming authorities, the Secretary of State will consider whether he should determine the application instead.

SHALE REGULATOR

The UK regulatory regime for shale gas is considered among the most robust and stringent in the world. However, we acknowledge that it is also complex, with three regulators, the Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and the Oil and Gas Authority, all with responsibilities for regulation. It is not always transparent to both the public and industry who is responsible for what. Therefore, the Government are setting up a shale environmental regulator which will bring the regulators together to act as one coherent single face for the public, mineral planning authorities and industry. We intend to establish the regulator from the summer.

We anticipate that the plans for the shale environmental regulator and future consultations will only apply in England.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS

We strongly believe that communities hosting shale gas developments should share in the financial returns they generate. The Government welcome the shale gas companies' commitment to make set payments to these communities, which could be worth up to £10 million for a typical site. Actions to support local communities are an important complement to the planning actions set out above. With that in mind, we want to go further, and we will work with industry to see how we can improve this offer.

In addition to this offer we also announced in the autumn statement 2016 that the shale wealth fund will provide additional resources to local communities, over and above industry schemes and other sources of Government funding. Local communities will benefit first and determine how the money is spent in their area.

[HCWS690]

EDUCATION

Schools and Colleges Guidance

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): This Government are committed to keeping children safe. All children, from whatever background and no matter what challenges they face, deserve a safe environment in which they can learn.

Today my Department is publishing the Government response to the recent Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) consultation. KCSIE is statutory guidance that schools and colleges must have regard to when carrying out their duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Children in this context includes anyone under the age of 18.

Alongside revised statutory guidance, the Department is publishing revised advice covering child-on-child sexual violence and sexual harassment.

The KCSIE consultation ran between 14 December 2017 and 22 February 2018. We were delighted to receive 311 responses. Officials have carefully considered every response and we have made additional changes to strengthen KCSIE as a result.

The most significant revision to KCSIE is the inclusion of a new part 5 to support schools and colleges to respond to reports of child-on-child sexual violence and sexual harassment. It is an important step in protecting children to include a dedicated part, covering this complex issue, in the statutory guidance. We were pleased that 87% of respondents agreed explicitly that schools and colleges holding more than one emergency contact number for each child was sensible. As such, we have included this in the revised guidance. Other changes include making the guidance even clearer that where staff have a safeguarding concern they should act on it immediately and providing more information about vulnerable children who may benefit from early help.

The sexual violence and sexual harassment advice has been strengthened to, among other things, be clear that it is relevant for all schools to be clear that child-on-child abuse can take place between children of all ages, provide more details as to what sexual harassment can look like and provide additional links to specialist support. The revised advice is published today and is available immediately to support schools and colleges.

As part of the Government response, we are publishing the revised KCSIE for information. This will allow schools and colleges time to consider any changes they might want to make to their policies and procedures before the revised guidance comes into force on 3 September 2018. Until the revised guidance comes into force, schools and colleges must continue to have regard to the existing KCSIE 2016 guidance.

Copies of the Government response, KCSIE and the sexual violence and sexual harassment advice will be placed in the Library of the House and are available on the Government website here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/keeping-children-safe-in-education-proposed-revisions>.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2>.

and <https://www.gov.uk/education/safeguarding-pupils>.

[HCWS693]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Regulations and Fire Safety

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, the Government asked Dame Judith Hackitt to undertake a thorough review of building

regulations and fire safety, with a particular focus on multiple-occupancy high-rise buildings. Her final report is being published today. It is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-building-regulations-and-fire-safety-final-report> and copies are being placed in the Libraries of both Houses. I intend to give an oral statement to the House later today to provide further detail on the publication of the report.

[HCWS692]

Planning Policy

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and I wish to reiterate the Government's view that there are potentially substantial benefits from the safe and sustainable exploration and development of our onshore shale gas resources and to set out in this statement to Parliament the actions we are taking to support our position. This joint statement should be considered in planning decisions and plan making in England.

The UK must have safe, secure and affordable supplies of energy with carbon emissions levels that are consistent with the carbon budgets defined in our Climate Change Act and our international obligations. We believe that gas has a key part to play in meeting these objectives both currently and in the future. In part as a result of the UK's diverse range of energy sources, which include natural gas, we have had competitively priced energy since 1990 while reducing carbon emissions across the economy by 49%—a leading performance among developed nations. Gas still makes up around a third of our current energy usage and every scenario proposed by the Committee on Climate Change setting out how the UK could meet its legally binding 2050 emissions reduction target includes demand for natural gas. As set out in the clean growth strategy, innovations in technologies such as carbon capture usage and storage (CCUS) have the potential to decarbonise this energy supply still further and prolong its role in our energy mix.

However, despite the welcome improvements in efficiency and innovation from companies operating in the North sea, the ongoing decline in our offshore gas production has meant that the UK has gone from being a net exporter of gas in 2003 to importing over half (53%) of gas supplies in 2017 and estimates suggest we could be importing 72% of our gas by 2030. Our current import mix, via pipelines from Norway and continental Europe and LNG terminals that can source gas from around the world, provides us with stable and secure supplies. However, we believe that it is right to utilise our domestic gas resources to the maximum extent and exploring further the potential for onshore gas production from shale rock formations in the UK, where it is economically efficient, and where environment impacts are robustly regulated.

We also believe that further development of onshore gas resources has the potential to deliver substantial economic benefits to the UK economy and for local communities where supplies are located by creating thousands of new jobs directly in extraction, local support

services, and the rest of the supply chain. A potential new shale gas exploration and production sector in the shale basins of England could provide a new economic driver. We also see an opportunity to work with industry on innovation to create a “UK Model”—the world’s most environmentally robust onshore shale gas sector—and to explore export opportunities from this model, a core theme of our modern industrial strategy.

But to achieve these benefits, we need to work with responsible companies prepared to invest in this industry as they proceed with the exploration process, to test the size and value of the potential reserves and to ensure that our planning and regulatory systems work appropriately while assisting local councils in making informed and appropriate planning decisions. So we are setting out a series of actions, including those committed to in the Government’s 2017 manifesto to support the development of shale gas extraction.

PLANNING

The UK has world-class regulation to ensure that shale exploration can happen safely, respecting local communities and safeguarding the environment. The development of the shale gas industry so far has already led to millions of pounds being invested in the UK, supporting businesses and the supply chain, and creating British jobs. We have recently seen four planning approvals for exploratory shale development. The Government remain fully committed to making planning decisions faster and fairer for all those affected by new development, and to ensure that local communities are fully involved in planning decisions that affect them. These are long-standing principles. No one benefits from the uncertainty caused by delay which is why, in September 2015, Government set out a range of measures to help ensure every planning application or appeal was dealt with as quickly as possible.

However, recent decisions on shale exploration planning applications remain disappointingly slow against a statutory time frame of 16 weeks where an environmental impact assessment is required. So we are announcing a range of measures to facilitate timely decisions. These measures only apply in England.

Planning policy and guidance

This statement is a material consideration in plan making and decision taking, alongside relevant policies of the existing national planning policy framework (2012), in particular those on mineral planning, including conventional and unconventional hydrocarbons.

Shale gas development is of national importance. The Government expect mineral planning authorities to give great weight to the benefits of mineral extraction, including to the economy. This includes shale gas exploration and extraction. Mineral plans should reflect that minerals resources can only be worked where they are found, and applications must be assessed on a site by site basis and having regard to their context. Plans should not set restrictions or thresholds across their plan area that limit shale development without proper justification. We expect mineral planning authorities to recognise the fact that Parliament has set out in statute the relevant definitions of hydrocarbon, natural gas and associated hydraulic fracturing. In addition, these matters are described in planning practice guidance, which plans must have due regard to. Consistent with

this planning practice guidance, policies should avoid undue sterilisation of mineral resources, including shale gas.

The Government have consulted on a draft revised national planning policy framework (NPPF). The consultation closed on 10 May 2018. In due course the revised national planning policy framework will sit alongside the written ministerial statement.

We intend to publish revised planning practice guidance on shale development once the revised national planning policy framework has been launched ensuring clarity on issues such as cumulative impact, local plan making and confirmation that planners can rely on the advice of regulatory experts.

Planning decision making

To support a decision-making regime that meets the future needs of the sector we will progress our manifesto commitments by:

Holding an early-stage consultation, in summer 2018, on the principle of whether non-hydraulic fracturing shale exploration development should be treated as permitted development, and in particular on the circumstances in which this might be appropriate.

Consulting, in summer 2018, on the criteria required to trigger the inclusion of shale production projects into the nationally significant infrastructure projects regime.

Further, we will strengthen community engagement by consulting in due course on the potential to make pre-application consultation a statutory requirement.

Support for those involved in decision making

We are aware that the shale applications and the planning process can be complex for local authorities. Building capacity and capability within local authorities to deal with shale development is a vital step towards speeding up decision making. We will help achieve this by announcing today:

The launch of a new £1.6 million shale support fund over the next two years to build capacity and capability in local authorities dealing with shale applications.

The creation of a new planning brokerage service for shale applications to provide guidance to developers and local authorities on the planning process to help facilitate timely decision making. The service would focus exclusively on the planning process and will have no role in the consideration or determination of planning applications. The service will not comment on the merits of a case and will also have no role in the appeals process.

In addition, the Government recognise that early engagement with local authorities, including capitalising on formal pre-application discussions, is critical in building confidence in decision making and securing support for development proposals and set realistic timeframes for decisions. We expect this to be formalised by a planning performance agreement providing certainty for all parties. And we then expect all parties—including decision makers in local authorities—to stick to the timetable.

Opportunities for redress

While we are confident that the measures announced in this written ministerial statement will speed up decision making on shale applications, we cannot be complacent. Therefore:

We will continue to treat appeals against any refusal of planning permission for exploring and developing shale gas, or against any non-determination as a priority for urgent determination by the planning inspectorate, making additional resources available where necessary.

Under the written ministerial statement in 2015 the criteria for recovering planning appeals were amended to include proposals for exploring and developing shale gas. This was applied for a two-year period subject to further review. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has conducted a review and remains committed to scrutinising appeals for these proposals. We are therefore announcing that the criteria for considering the recovery of planning appeals are continued for a further two years. The new criterion is added to the recovery policy of 30 June 2008, *Official Report*, column 43WS.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government will actively consider calling in shale applications particularly where statutory deadlines have been exceeded. Each case will be considered on its facts in line with his policy. Priority timeframes for urgent determination will be given to any called-in applications.

The Government continue to commit to identifying underperforming local planning authorities that repeatedly fail to determine oil and gas applications within statutory timeframes. When any future applications are made to underperforming authorities, the Secretary of State will consider whether he should determine the application instead.

SHALE REGULATOR

The UK regulatory regime for shale gas is considered among the most robust and stringent in the world. However, we acknowledge that it is also complex, with three regulators, the Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and the Oil and Gas Authority, all with responsibilities for regulation. It is not always transparent to both the public and industry who is responsible for what. Therefore, the Government are setting up a shale environmental regulator which will bring the regulators together to act as one coherent single face for the public, mineral planning authorities and industry. We intend to establish the regulator from the summer.

We anticipate that the plans for the shale environmental regulator and future consultations will only apply in England.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS

We strongly believe that communities hosting shale gas developments should share in the financial returns they generate. The Government welcome the shale gas companies' commitment to make set payments to these communities, which could be worth up to £10 million for a typical site. Actions to support local communities are an important complement to the planning actions set out above. With that in mind, we want to go further, and we will work with industry to see how we can improve this offer.

In addition to this offer we also announced in the autumn statement 2016 that the shale wealth fund will provide additional resources to local communities, over and above industry schemes and other sources of Government funding. Local communities will benefit first and determine how the money is spent in their area.

[HCWS689]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment: Aid Sector

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Following the written ministerial statement of 20 March, *Official Report*, column 11WS,

I am updating the House on what the Department for International Development (DFID) is doing to protect recipients of UK aid and those working in the sector from harm—safeguarding for short—with our focus on preventing and responding to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

Ensuring DFID's programmes meet the highest standards

Around 60% of DFID's funding is delivered through multilateral organisations. On 21 April I co-hosted with the Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Co-operation a roundtable with senior representatives of international financial institutions—I am placing the list of names in an annex to this document in the Libraries of both Houses—and discussed how we can pool best practice and resources to tackle this issue across the sector. All 10 institutions signed a joint statement reaffirming their commitment to preventing sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation, both within their own institutions and their operations, many of which are funded by DFID. I will be pressing for them to translate this commitment into further concrete actions in 2018.

From my recent meetings in Washington it is clear that multilateral organisations are taking this issue extremely seriously and looking to learn from previous cases and improve their systems and processes. For example, the World Bank has strengthened its staff rules covering sexual misconduct and abuse and is rolling out staff training and a wider review of its human resources policies with respect to sexual harassment and exploitation.

The UN Secretary-General has made clear his zero tolerance approach to both sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment. In the past two weeks I have discussed safeguarding with the heads of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. At the UN system chief executives board meeting in London earlier in May, Secretary-General António Guterres led a special session with the heads of 31 UN agencies, funds and programmes on addressing sexual harassment within the UN system. This included a new 24-hour helpline for staff to report harassment and access support, so fast-tracking complaints. I am pressing for agreement to a consistent UN-wide approach on reporting, investigation and outreach, and support when cases of sexual exploitation, abuse or harassment occur.

I am also pressing all organisations that DFID funds to learn from best and worst practice. Last month Save the Children UK withdrew from bidding for new UK Government funding while it looks to learn lessons and the Charity Commission carries out a statutory inquiry into its handling of internal cases.

Following my letter to DFID partners seeking assurances on their safeguarding policies and procedures, I have now received responses from our top suppliers, multilateral partners, development capital partners and research partners. This is a total of 283 organisations. I will publish a high-level summary of the returns on gov.uk later this month updating the information published on 20 March on the 179 charities directly receiving UK aid. I am including the link to that document in an annex to this document in the Libraries of both Houses.

Following the 5 March summit organised by DFID and the Charity Commission, DFID has convened four NGO working groups and an external experts group to

develop concrete ideas. I met representatives of the working groups and the experts this week to discuss which of their initial proposals could make the biggest difference. The work is focusing on:

accountability to beneficiaries and survivors—prioritising those who have suffered and survived exploitation, abuse and violence, and designing systems of accountability and transparency that have beneficiaries at their centre;

how the aid sector can demonstrate a step change in shifting organisational culture to tackle power imbalances and gender inequality;

ensuring that safeguards are integrated throughout the employment cycle, including work on the proposal for a global register/passport; and

providing full accountability through rigorous reporting and complaints mechanisms, and ensuring that concerns are heard and acted on.

Ensuring all UK aid meets the highest standards

On 28 March I chaired a meeting of UK Government Departments that spend official development assistance (ODA). I updated Ministers on DFID's work including the new safeguarding due diligence standards which I announced in March. Following a successful pilot, the new process will be rolled out to other programmes later this month. DFID will write to all other UK ODA spending departments with the details should they wish to adopt the same approach.

This month senior DFID officials have held further meetings with opposite numbers from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Cabinet Office and the Charity Commission to discuss how we can raise our own performances on safeguarding and that of others in the aid sector.

I am in contact with the Ministry of Defence about pre-deployment training for peacekeeping operations, and DFID's HR director has been working with colleagues across Whitehall to drive up internal HR standards.

Working with other donors to drive up standards

The Department is working closely with Canada as G7 presidency and at a meeting of G7 Development Ministers at the end of May I have been asked to lead a discussion on sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

DFID is now chairing monthly meetings of a group of 15 donors—I am placing the list of names in the Libraries of both Houses—to seek collective action including in our key implementing partners.

DFID is also working with the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to explore how to measure donors' performance on sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment as part regular peer reviews. I plan to write to all DAC donors, observers and other major donors updating them on our work and seeking their suggestions.

The UK is leading the change needed on this issue. We have made good progress since March and I will use every opportunity possible in the coming weeks and months to push for much more. I will host an international conference in London on 18 October.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-05-17/HCWS694/>.

[HCWS694]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Foreign Affairs Council (Trade)

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The EU Foreign Affairs Council (Trade) will take place in Brussels on 22 May 2018. I will be representing the UK.

The substantive items on 22 May will be: adoption of the negotiating mandates for free trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand, adoption of conclusions on the negotiation and conclusion of EU trade arrangements, and follow-up to the 11 World Trade Organisation ministerial conference (MC11). There will also be an exchange of views on the EU-Japan economic partnership agreement, the EU-Singapore free trade agreement and the EU-Singapore investment protection agreement.

[HCWS688]

PRIME MINISTER

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: UK Delegation

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): My hon. Friends the Members for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Robert Goodwill) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) have been appointed as substitute members of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in place of my hon. Friends the Members for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), for Gordon (Colin Clark), for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) and for Erewash (Maggie Throup).

[HCWS691]

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Disabled People: Elected Office

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): It is essential that our public offices, from the UK Parliament to local government, reflect the diversity of the UK population. Currently the disabled population of this country is not sufficiently represented.

If we want to inspire and encourage businesses and other organisations to place inclusivity at the heart of their work, then politicians should lead by example. Political parties also have a duty to ensure they encourage and support their candidates as well as support to their workforce and ensure a level playing field in recruitment.

The Government Equalities Office, together with the Office for Disability Issues and the Cabinet Office, will consult with disability stakeholders to undertake a programme of work over the next 12 months to help both major and smaller political parties best support disabled candidates.

The prime responsibility for this would sit with political parties themselves. However within this, there will be ways the Government can help too, for example by looking at extending the support we already provide in other areas such as employment to enable other activities such as volunteering or representing their communities.

Within 12 months we hope to have political parties offering and advertising support, as well as solutions to help independent candidates.

While this work is ongoing we want to ensure that disabled people can run for office, so we are announcing a fund of up to £250,000 to support disabled candidates, primarily for the forthcoming English local elections in 2019. We will set out further details about the scheme in the near future and any measures taken to ensure such costs are not considered to be part of a candidate's election expenses.

Establishing this fund should not disincentivise political parties from continuing to develop their own measures. Instead, it should help them prioritise this issue and take action to ensure no one is disadvantaged in the democratic process.

I hope that the interim fund will also help us gather further evidence of what good practice looks like.

I will keep the House updated on further developments.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt)

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith)

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton)

[HCWS695]

Petition

Thursday 17 May 2018

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Musgrove Park Hospital

The petition of residents of Taunton Deane,

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

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

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Rebecca Pow, *Official Report*, 21 March 2018; Vol. 638, c. 355.]

[P002122]

Observations from the Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay):

Taunton and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust's (TSFT) theatres and critical care facilities at the Musgrove Park Hospital are housed in pre-war buildings that are at risk of critical infrastructure failure due to their age and condition.

The Trust set out proposals to invest £79.6 million in the development of modern fit-for-purpose operating theatres, a critical care unit and an endoscopy unit. However, because of Taunton and Somerset Foundations Trust's (TSFT) financial position, it is unable to finance the proposed build from funds generated and held internally. The Trust therefore made a bid for funds made available through the Sustainability and Transformation Plan (STP) capital bidding process.

At the Autumn budget, the Government set aside £760 million to modernise and transform NHS buildings and services in the year of the NHS's 70th birthday. The Government recognise that Musgrove Park hospital's theatres and critical care facilities need to be improved significantly, and have since announced that Somerset STP will receive up to £79.4 million to replace outdated theatres, endoscopy and critical care facilities at TSFT. These new facilities will provide a better patient experience, more efficient working environment, improved efficiency from better service co-location, and provide sufficient capacity to sustain services.

The allocation is subject to the standard business case approvals, including demonstrating recurrent savings and value for money. It is also conditional on the STP having a robust plan for disposing surplus land and buildings, and moving towards shared local clinical and financial accountability.

The Trust has submitted its Outline Business Case (OBC) to NHS Improvement, and it is due to go to its Resource Committee in June, following which it will come to the Department for approval through Ministers and HM Treasury, as required for all business cases over £50 million.

Following OBC approval the Trust can undertake the procurement for its scheme and it is planning to submit its Full Business Case with the full affordability and commercial arrangements to NHSI in April 2019. DHSC is committed to working with the Trust and NHSI to expedite the process where possible.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 17 May 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
INTERNATIONAL TRADE	403	WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—continued	
Commonwealth Countries: Trade Agreements.....	411	Domestic Abuse: Health Priorities	419
EU Free Trade Agreements.....	411	Domestic Abuse: Support for Women	422
Foreign Direct Investment.....	408	Freelance Workers: Shared Parental Leave.....	417
Free Trade Promotion.....	407	Gender Pay Gap: Action Plans	416
Leaving the EU: Preferential Market Access.....	410	Gender Recognition Act 2004	421
Leaving the EU: Textile and Fashion Industry.....	406	Gendered Online Abuse	421
Leaving the EU: Third-country Trade Deals.....	409	Leaving the EU: Effect on Women	417
Leaving the EU: Women's Rights.....	404	Protected Characteristics: Caste.....	415
Topical Questions	412	STEM Careers	414
US Tariffs: Steel and Aluminium	403	Topical Questions	422
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	414		
Business: Representation of Women	418		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 17 May 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL		INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	19WS
STRATEGY	11WS	Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment:	
Energy Policy	11WS	Aid Sector.....	19WS
EDUCATION	14WS	INTERNATIONAL TRADE	22WS
Schools and Colleges Guidance	14WS	Foreign Affairs Council (Trade).....	22WS
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL		PRIME MINISTER	22WS
GOVERNMENT	15WS	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of	
Building Regulations and Fire Safety.....	15WS	Europe: UK Delegation	22WS
Planning Policy	16WS	WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	22WS
		Disabled People: Elected Office.....	22WS

PETITION

Thursday 17 May 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	1P
Musgrove Park Hospital	1P

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**not later than
Thursday 24 May 2018**

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CONTENTS

Thursday 17 May 2018

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 403] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for International Trade
Minister for Women and Equalities

Business of the House [Col. 427]

Statement—(Andrea Leadsom)

Gaming Machines [Col. 444]

Statement—(Tracey Crouch)

Building Regulations and Fire Safety [Col. 457]

Statement—(James Brokenshire)

Pharmaceutical Sector [Col. 469]

Select Committee Statement—(Rachel Reeves)

Private Members' Bills: Money Resolutions [Col. 475]

Application for emergency debate under Standing Order No. 24

Backbench Business

Plastic Bottles and Coffee Cups [Col. 477]

Motion—(Mary Creagh)—agreed to

International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia [Col. 509]

Motion—(Peter Kyle)—agreed to

Heathrow Expansion: Lakeside Energy from Waste Ltd [Col. 537]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Local Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committees [Col. 205WH]

Freedom of Speech: Universities [Col. 222WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 11WS]

Petition [Col. 1P]

Observations

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
