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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 24 May 2018

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Rail Industry

1. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the rail industry. [905544]

3. **Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the rail industry. [905547]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government's rail sector report was published in December and included an analysis of the rail industry. We keep our analysis under constant review. Our future relationship with the EU on rail will be a matter for the negotiations. Both the UK and the EU have greatly benefited from investment in each other's rail markets. We want that to continue as the UK leaves the EU.

John Mc Nally: The Secretary of State will be aware that passengers in Scotland have been protected from the impact of fare increases as a result of the Scottish Government's cap of RPI minus 1%. Will he not take a leaf out of the Scottish Government's book to ensure that passengers are not hit in their pockets as the result of his Government's inability to provide even basic certainty over Brexit?

Chris Grayling: I am not sure quite what that has to do with our future relationship with the EU, but I want the rate of increase of rail fares to come down. The biggest barrier to that is the Labour party's and the trade unions' insistence that the RPI measure has to be at the heart of every pay increase in the rail industry. The industry collectively needs to move to RPI, but the training manuals for the unions that back the Labour party insist that it is unacceptable to negotiate on anything except an RPI increase.

Tommy Sheppard: The Government often cite EU regulations on state aid as a constraint on their agency. Can we therefore look forward, after Brexit, to innovative new approaches to the public ownership of the railways, or will the Secretary of State continue to sell rail services to the state-owned companies of other EU countries?

Chris Grayling: We have a diverse rail market, with investment from the UK and international investment. I hope very much that after Brexit we will not become a

country that does not welcome international investment. We are an outward-facing global nation, and I hope that will continue.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): In the Secretary of State's assessment of the rail industry post Brexit, did he include the vital nature of securing resilience in the coastal railway at Dawlish, given the link to Falmouth docks and the freight services that bring in exports?

Chris Grayling: I want to reiterate that this is an absolutely crucial project for our railways. Network Rail is currently doing preparatory work for the very necessary improvements at Dawlish. I have given an absolute commitment that those works will go ahead. I regard this project, to make sure a proper resilient railway for the future is delivered to the south-west, as the most important infrastructure project in the country. It is one thing having a railway that is not quite up to date; it is quite another having a railway that gets cut off. We will not let that happen.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The east coast main line will be very important following our departure from Europe. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that smaller operators, such as ScotRail, have a say in what happens to rail?

Chris Grayling: It is really important that we protect the interests of passenger and freight operators. I have been clear that the new board leading the integration and development of the London North Eastern Railway will have representatives whose job is to protect the interests of smaller operators.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): EU rules clearly did not prevent the Government from taking the east coast franchise off Stagecoach last week, which shows their power to remove a franchise from a failing operator is not hampered by them. Given that this week we managed to pass 300 cancellations on the Lakes line in Cumbria since the beginning of April, and the enormous and catastrophic impact that is having on commuters, tourists and GCSE students trying to get to their exams, will the Secretary of State listen to the exasperated travellers of Cumbria and intervene to strip Northern of both its Furness and Lakes franchises—and do it today?

Chris Grayling: Let us be clear: the situation with Northern has been unacceptable. As I said yesterday, I will this morning chair a conference call with the Northern leaders. This is the most devolved franchise. It is a partnership between Northern leaders and the Department for Transport, but it is not solely led by the Department. None the less, it is no less important to me that we get this situation resolved. I am very clear that this problem has arisen for two prime reasons: the problems with electrification Network Rail is carrying out on the line through Bolton and the failure of Network Rail to deliver a finalised timetable in time. When the hon. Gentleman talks about the need to strip the franchise and renationalise, he is shooting at the wrong target. This is a Network Rail failure and it must not happen again.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): We know that since rail privatisation the Secretary of State thinks magic money appears from nowhere with no risk to the taxpayer, but that is not the case. When it comes

to infrastructure, the UK relied on £35 billion of loans from the European Investment Bank between 2011 and 2015. Where will that money come from for rail infrastructure post Brexit?

Chris Grayling: We are a substantial net contributor to the European Union, so the money given to the UK from different European funds actually originates in the UK. We will be able to spend our money in the way we see fit. We are of course spending record amounts of money on rail infrastructure to develop what needs to be a better, expanded and more resilient rail network.

Digital Railway Strategy

2. **Mr Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): What steps he is taking to implement the digital railway strategy. [905546]

4. **Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What steps he is taking to implement the digital railway strategy. [905549]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Two weeks ago, Mark Carne, the chief executive of Network Rail, and I launched the company's digital railway strategy in York, where we announced that the industry should make plans for all future renewals to be digital or digital-ready. I have already approved funding to develop digital schemes in Moorgate and the south-east, and in particular, I have set out plans for the new TransPennine route. The £2.9 billion modernisation, starting around this time next year, will be Britain's first, principal inter-city digital railway, and very necessary it is.

Mr Seely: Later this month, the priced option for the Island line in my constituency will be presented. I will be writing next week in support of that priced option. Can the Minister assure me that the Government understands the importance of the Island line to the Island and the importance of investment in it—in track, railway and stations such as Ryde Pier Head, which is on the pier, and Ryde Esplanade, which is a key gateway? Is he aware of my strong support for a feasibility study into extending the Island line south and west?

Mr Speaker: I must tell the hon. Gentleman that one of his constituents, not very far from here, has been listening intently to his question.

Chris Grayling: I know indeed, Mr Speaker—in fact, he used to be a constituent of mine and is now benefiting from the wonderful environment that is the Isle of Wight. My hon. Friend has been an excellent champion for it since his election. I can assure him that the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), and I will be taking careful note of the plans as they come through, and we will work with him to try to find the best way to ensure that his constituents have the best service that it is possible to deliver to them in future.

Mr Speaker: I call Tom Tugendhat—where is the fella? He has obviously beetled out of the Chamber. It is a pity that the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling is not here, but we will bear up stoically and try to manage without him.

18. [905565] **Karen Lee** (Lincoln) (Lab): Following the collapse of the east coast main line franchise, will the Secretary of State make a firm commitment to Virgin's previous pledge to deliver additional train services between Lincoln and London in 2019? They are essential for our local businesses.

Chris Grayling: Let me be very clear: it is my intention that the commitments to new services made in the Virgin Trains franchise are delivered. The hon. Lady will know, as I have told the House before, that there is an issue and has been for some while around the timing of some of those services because of problems with infrastructure improvements. I am putting Network Rail under as much pressure as possible to deliver those as quickly as possible. I give her and all Members who are waiting for these new services an assurance that I will make sure that they are delivered.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Can the Secretary of State tell me how the roll-out of the digital strategy, which is in itself a good thing, on my local lines is going to stop me receiving tweets like the one I received this morning? It said:

“Chaos for 4th day on SE lines—trains cancelled, late, diverted, not stopping, short formation & angry passengers”.

How is the strategy going to help that?

Chris Grayling: There are benefits of digital technology, but my hon. Friend will be aware that this is a difficult week on the railways, as I have explained. It has happened because of the late delivery of the timetable. This is the second time that it has happened in six months. I have already had discussions with Network Rail about this. It must not happen again. What the digital railway will do is create a railway that can run more trains more reliably. It gets rid of the risk of traditional signal failures, which are a big part of the frustrations that many commuters face, and I want to see, over the next few years, our stopping replacing old-fashioned traffic-light signals and using digital technology instead.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): A digital railway is vital for improving capacity in the far south-west but will not necessarily improve journey speeds. If our journey times are to be long, they at least need to be productive, so can I ask the Secretary of State to commit to working with colleagues at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to improve our mobile and wi-fi signals to remove all the notspots in the far south-west, especially on rail journeys to Plymouth?

Chris Grayling: Sometimes, we disagree across the Chamber, but on this one I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We are looking at the best options to do this. I think that we should be getting mobile operators to put up more masts down the route, and particularly as we move to a 5G network, I want to see that 5G network up and down the railway—and not just for passengers; it helps the digital railway as well. On this one, I am absolutely with him.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What is it?

Chris Grayling: I commend my right hon. Friend for his very good question. The transition to digital technology basically means that in future, rather than having a red-amber-green signal by the trackside, the signalling is done automatically from the cab of a train. Each train will know how far it is to the train in front. It is therefore possible to manage the network more efficiently, to run trains safely closer to each other and to deliver more capacity for passengers.

Mr Speaker: It all sounds very sophisticated, although it is a bit above my pay grade, I am bound to say.

Bus Services

5. **Dr Paul Williams** (Stockton South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support local bus services. [905550]

14. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve the provision of bus services throughout the country. [905559]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The bus market outside London is deregulated, and decisions regarding service provision are primarily a commercial matter for bus operators. Decisions on subsidised bus services are a matter for individual English local authorities, in the light of their own spending priorities. The Government paid out some £250 million last year to support bus services in England through the bus subsidy operators grant. The Bus Services Act 2017 introduced new powers for local authorities and operators to work together to improve local bus services and increase passenger numbers.

Dr Williams: Arriva has cut the bus service in Hartburn on which my constituents rely, replacing a doorstep service with what is now a 20-minute walk for older people. I have written to the Tees Valley combined authority about it, but what is the Government's position on communities that are isolated by public transport cuts?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman has raised a valid point, but local authorities are responsible for providing local bus services, and we expect them to work with local operators, Members of Parliament and local communities to do that. Of the £250 million grant that I mentioned earlier, £40 million is paid directly to local authorities to improve bus services in their areas, including the service to which the hon. Gentleman has referred. I believe that the Department paid £88,000 last year to Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, which I am sure he will welcome.

Jeff Smith: Over the past four years, Greater Manchester has lost 8 million miles of bus routes, largely owing to the chronic underfunding of local government. Councils are forced to freeze funds, while costs rocket. Does the Minister accept that unless local government funding is increased, mayors and transport authorities will not be able to use the new powers in the Bus Services Act to full effect?

Ms Ghani: That is an interesting question. The Government have provided plenty of support for bus services in Manchester—[*Interruption.*] I will continue, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Apologies for the noise.

Ms Ghani: Not at all.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): It was the hooting of a bus horn.

Ms Ghani: It happened because I was about to mention two very important packages of funding.

The Department contributed just over £32 million towards the £43.2 million Manchester cross city bus package, which was completed in 2017. Now we need another little beat of the drum, because there is another huge sum coming up. The Greater Manchester combined authority received a guaranteed allocation of £243 million from the £1.7 billion transforming cities fund to improve public transport. If the hon. Gentleman is still not satisfied, I suggest that he talk to the Mayor.

Mr Speaker: I can only imagine that it was a noise of approval. Who knows? It may be a divisible proposition, but there we go.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): One very important aspect of bus services is the role played by community services, particularly in rural areas. There is great concern about the consultation that the Department are currently undertaking. When can we expect some final announcements?

Ms Ghani: The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), is overseeing the consultation, and he will make an announcement before the summer. The Department understands the importance of community transport services, which not only tackle isolation but enable people who would not otherwise have access to transport to keep appointments. I understand their importance particularly well, because I represent a rural constituency. The Department is very concerned about the issue, and we will do what we can to help.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): For the first time in decades, the people of Cornwall are enjoying brand-new buses on our roads. They offer facilities that people used to think were available only in big cities, such as contactless payment, on-board wi-fi and charging points, and they have been delivered thanks to a partnership between First Kernow, the operator, and Cornwall Council. Will the Minister join me in welcoming the new buses; would she like to come to Cornwall to see them; and does she agree that their delivery demonstrates what can be done, even in rural communities, when local authorities use the powers available to them and work with the private sector?

Ms Ghani: I welcome the invitation to Cornwall—my summer holiday seems to have been sorted out—and I welcome the new First Kernow buses. I also welcome the fact that the local authority in my hon. Friend's constituency has worked with the private operator and with the Member of Parliament. That shows that if people and organisations work together, they can put bus services together, even in rural communities.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Since 2010, bus budgets have been slashed by a third and over 2,500 routes have been withdrawn entirely. The Government recognise that franchising boosts patronage and improves services,

which is why franchising was extended to the metro mayoralties. Why then in the midst of a bus crisis is the Minister refusing these same powers to councils across the rest of the country?

Ms Ghani: Packages for buses are at an all-time high, and I would ask why the mayors who already have the powers have not taken them up. The policy at the moment applies to London and the Mayors of Manchester and Liverpool, so I suggest the hon. Gentleman ask his own Labour Mayor of London why he has not taken these powers up.

Strategic Road Network

6. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to improve the strategic road network.

[905551]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): Projects up and down the country are being delivered through the Government's £15 billion investment in our strategic roads, our motorways and main A roads. I salute my ministerial colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), who had a fanfare a few minutes ago, and I think the reason for that was that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State officially opened the £400 million A1 upgrade from Leeming to Barton last week, so there is now a continuous motorway link between Newcastle and London for the first time in this country's history.

Mark Pawsey: The A5 through Warwickshire and Leicestershire is an important strategic route throughout the midlands and is a valuable relief road in the event of hold-ups on the M6, which can happen from time to time. It is however mostly single carriageway, and with significant amounts of development proposed along the route, will the Minister ensure that detailed work can start urgently to improve both safety and capacity?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will know, we discussed this in a Westminster Hall debate in February and I have seen him and colleagues recently. It is a very important matter; we are aware of the strategic importance of the A5. We already have work in prospect between Dodwells and the Longshoot junction and we will continue to look closely at the matter.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Substantial congestion exists on the M60, M62 and M56 around Greater Manchester, but Highways England's investment plans start north-east of this area. Given the very significant economic regeneration plans for south-west Manchester including at the airport, the new HS2 station and New Carrington in my constituency, which the Minister has visited, does he agree that Highways England must now attend to the investment that that will require in the south-west quarter of this motorway network?

Jesse Norman: I take on board the hon. Lady's point, but the point I would make in response is that, over the next three years, Highways England will be investing and, by the end of that period, at a rate roughly three times more than the rate the Government inherited in 2010. Therefore, unprecedented levels of investment are going in. The hon. Lady is welcome to write to me or meet me if she wants to discuss this issue further.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I welcome the improvements to the A1 to Newcastle, but there is great demand for improvements to the part of the A1 north of Newcastle to the border and my constituency. Can the Minister update the House on improvements to that part of the road to Berwick-upon-Tweed and the border with Scotland?

Jesse Norman: A series of potential schemes are in place and they are moving forward to different forms of announcement or development, but I would be happy to send my hon. Friend a more detailed update.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Can the Minister explain to me why Highways England refused to take any interest in the provision of an alternative for the Orwell bridge on the A14, which is a vital strategic link that is often closed?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman and I have met and we have met Highways England to discuss this, and I think it is overstating the matter to say there is no interest at all, but we continue to look at the issue.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Drivers who hog the middle lane of motorways has always been a problem, but as traffic volumes increase the impact will be even greater. This problem makes the roads dangerous for other drivers and slows down traffic. What can be done about this?

Jesse Norman: There is guidance on this already, as my hon. Friend will know. I am not sure whether it is reflected in the road safety statistics, but I am happy to look at that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Owing to the sheer scale of the damage the proposed A27 project will do to ancient woodland and the South Downs national park, let alone the eventual impact on air pollution caused by induced capacity, 10 of Britain's leading environmental groups have written to the Secretary of State to highlight how his proposals contravene his own national policy statement for national networks. So has he changed his definition of "irreversible damage" or will he urgently review this scheme?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady will know, many of those ancient woodlands were planted only in the past couple of decades, so I am not sure that she has quite made her point.

GWR Franchise

7. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What plans he has for the operation of trains in the Thames valley after the end of the Great Western rail franchise. [905552]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): The current Great Western franchise ends on 31 March 2020. In November 2017, the Department started its consultation on the future of services. Department for Transport officials are currently evaluating options for the specification of the franchise from April 2020, and throughout the 2020s, with the aim of issuing the specification later this year.

Dr Huq: It is a tale of two railways in Ealing and Acton. This week I have heard praise for not-for-profit TfL rail services, whose users rate its reliability, but also complaints about GWR services, which are based on profitability, that have been cancelled without recompense. Will the Minister at the first opportunity take the Thames Valley franchise back into public ownership and scrap the crackpot idea to split it further? That would do us all a favour—the Exchequer and not just shareholders—before he is forced to do so when it flops.

Joseph Johnson: I fear that the hon. Lady is under a misapprehension as to the nature of the TfL contractual arrangements on that line, but she will be pleased to know that we are transferring services to TfL, including those from Paddington to Hayes and Harlington, and Heathrow Connect.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announces the successor to the GWR franchise, will he ensure that the Cotswold line and the Kemble to Swindon line have an increased number of services and increased punctuality, so that the large amount of money that the taxpayer has put into Network Rail to redouble those services is properly utilised?

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is a strong champion for services on the Cotswold line. We will certainly take into account his advocacy for it.

Disabled Rail Passengers

8. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to improve accessibility for disabled rail passengers. [905553]

15. **Trudy Harrison** (Copeland) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to improve accessibility for disabled rail passengers. [905562]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Government will publish an inclusive transport strategy later this year. I assure my hon. Friends that I and the Department believe that disabled people should have the same access to transport as anyone else and be able to travel easily, confidently and without extra cost. All train fleets operating passenger services will meet modern accessibility standards by 1 January 2020. Further funding for the Access for All stations programme will be made available for 2019 to 2024.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Clearly, there is a desperate need for a lift at both Stanmore and Canons Park stations. That is the responsibility of the Labour Mayor of London, who has failed to deliver. Also, Harrow and Wealdstone station is in my constituency, and the local authority's civic centre is part of the "Heart of Harrow" regeneration scheme. The station does not have disabled access or step-free access, even though it has an overground, underground and Network Rail interchange. How can we get suitable access to that station?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. Transport for London manages transport services in the capital and is responsible for implementing the

Mayor of London's transport strategy, so Stanmore and Canons Park underground stations are his responsibility. I hope he is following today's proceedings and will deliver for disabled and able-bodied passengers in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Of course, Harrow and Wealdstone station falls under the Access for All stations programme, and bidding for funding will open shortly. I urge my hon. Friend to get in touch with his local authority, which can work with the transport operating companies and put together the best possible bid to secure funding.

Trudy Harrison: Now that the Minister has confirmed that the Government will continue the Access for All scheme, which has improved accessibility across many of this country's railway stations, can she advise us on how can we get the Cumbrian coastal railways included in future funding bids?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend is a great champion for her constituency, so she will no doubt help the local authority and transport operating company to put together the best possible bid. The Access for All programme will provide step-free access to stations across the country, and I know how popular it is across the House. It will be open for bidding shortly. Stations will need to be nominated by the transport operating company, based on chosen criteria. Annual footfall and the local incidence of disability will be taken into account, as well as priorities such as industry and local factors such as proximity to hospitals and availability of third-party funding.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has already slashed £50 million from the Access for All fund, and now Govia Thameslink Railways' new staff guidance says,

"do not attempt to place persons of reduced mobility on a train if there is a possibility of delaying the service"

and that they should

"move from the train as quickly as possible"

someone having a seizure. That is not only completely wrong medical advice, but directly discriminates against disabled people. Why has the Minister not intervened, and why has GTR been allowed to get away with this direct disability discrimination?

Ms Ghani: Since 2006, about 200 stations have been made step-free and 75% of rail journeys are now step-free through stations. Funding has been made available and will continue to be made available. One of the biggest issues we have in getting people who are disabled to use public transport is confidence, so we need to let them know that we have accessible stations. Now I will respond to the point about GTR. There was one line in the document—

Rachael Maskell: It is so discriminatory.

Ms Ghani: Will the hon. Lady give me a minute to respond? It was not the best use of language, and I can update the House and say that my officials have spoken to GTR and raised concerns about that line and the language used in the leaflet. The leaflet is good overall, but the hon. Lady is right to point out that one particular line was not appropriate, and it will be revised.

Mr Speaker: Order. Forgive me; these are very informative answers, but we have a lot of questions to get through, so we need short answers and short questions.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Disabled passengers in the Lawrence Hill area of my constituency are not being served with step-free access, although they have been promised it for some years. They have to get a train upline and then another downline on the other side before they can get to Temple Meads to get a mainline train. Will the Minister meet me and Councillor Margaret Hickman to discuss this urgently?

Ms Ghani: Of course I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to talk about accessibility in her constituency. As I mentioned earlier, Access for All funding is available for train stations; if she were alluding to a tube station, that would be another situation altogether. As she is talking about a train station, I am more than happy to meet her.

Transport Police Merger: Scotland

9. **Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con):** What recent discussions he has held with the Scottish Government on the proposed merger of the British Transport police Scottish division with Police Scotland. [905554]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): Officials have been working closely and effectively with the Scottish Government, the two police forces and the two police authorities, through a joint programme board established to oversee arrangements for delivering the transfer of the British Transport police's functions in Scotland. We want to see a smooth transition to the new arrangements that ensures the safety and security of rail passengers and staff, and recognises and protects the UK's interests.

Douglas Ross: Earlier this month, BTP Federation chair Nigel Goodband said:

"It is appalling that the Scottish Government constantly reminds us that one of its three aims in full integration is accountability to the people of Scotland. British Transport police officers and staff...are people of Scotland. They are proud Scots; they are proud to be in the British Transport Police and proud of living in Scotland."

He continued:

"They have said to me that they feel abandoned...by their Government. That is pretty disgusting. It is alarming that they feel that way."

Does the Minister agree that that quote proves that the SNP Scottish Government are letting down hard-working and dedicated BTP officers and staff in Scotland and that their interests and the interests of the public they proudly protect would be better served by maintaining the way that the BTP operates in Scotland, rather than breaking up a force that serves Scotland and the United Kingdom well?

Joseph Johnson: I certainly understand my hon. Friend's concerns. It is in both Governments' mutual interest to make the new arrangements work. The Government are very focused on protecting UK interests generally, including those of passengers, officers and staff, and that is why we are working closely with the Scottish Government, the police forces and the police authorities.

Heathrow: Third Runway

10. **Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con):** What estimate he has made of the cost to the public purse of the construction and operation of a third runway at Heathrow. [905555]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government have always been clear that any scheme for additional airport capacity should be financed by the private sector. The Airports Commission concluded that this was a viable way forward. As set out in the revised draft airports national policy statement, independent financial advisers have undertaken further work and agreed that expansion of Heathrow can be carried out without public finance.

Adam Afriyie: I thank the Secretary of State for the answer. The report by the Select Committee on Transport on the airports national policy statement said that the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant should be treated "with equivalent recognition as the Immigration Removal Centres and that the replacement of its facilities be accounted for in the DCO process."

Will the Secretary of State confirm that his Department has assessed any infrastructure upgrade needed, such as that to roads and powerlines, to accommodate the relocation, and will those costs be met by the taxpayer?

Chris Grayling: First, I extend my thanks to the Select Committee, which has produced a thoughtful report. We will be responding to the report in detail very shortly; indeed, my officials are speaking to the Chair of the Committee to make sure she is fully up to speed with how we are handling all this.

Of course it is essential that appropriate provision is made for the energy from waste plant, and I think that provision should be funded by the airport as part of its work. I do not see why the taxpayer should bear the cost. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) that the plant and other facilities, and the communities around the airport, are very much on my Department's mind as we take these matters forward.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Transport Committee report on the national policy statement found that the Heathrow north-west runway proposal has little, if any, advantage over other schemes, or even over doing nothing at all, for passenger growth or for the number and frequency of long-haul routes, and that the proposal would actually cut international links for non-London regions and would have little economic benefit to the UK, so are the Government pushing ahead with this hugely expensive and environmentally damaging project?

Chris Grayling: When I am ready to update the House, I will of course come back to do so in person. The Committee recommended that the Government progress with their work, and it made a number of very helpful and constructive suggestions about elements to be included within that work. I remain absolutely of the view that airport expansion is necessary for the economy of this country. The important thing is that we deliver it in the best possible way for local communities.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): May I suggest to the Secretary of State that a much cheaper and more practicable alternative to the Heathrow third runway would be to use the considerable spare capacity and

long runway at Birmingham airport by electrifying and upgrading the Chiltern railway line and linking it to Crossrail? This would provide for a fast, direct, non-stop shuttle service between central London and Birmingham airport and would help to solve the south-east airport capacity problem. Will he give serious consideration to this proposal?

Chris Grayling: Of course the arrival of HS2, with projected future growth in passenger numbers at our airports, will provide an alternative and will provide for a bit of competition between airports, which is no bad thing. The hon. Gentleman is right about that, but I do not think it is either one or the other.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) has had to be away for a period. We have missed him, and I think I speak for colleagues in warmly welcoming him back to the Chamber.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): That is very kind, Mr Speaker. Thank you very much indeed.

Can the Secretary of State confirm whether he will be revising the airports national policy statement in the light of the 25 recommendations from the Transport Committee?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman and I sometimes spar vigorously across the Chamber, but I echo your words to him, Mr Speaker.

If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I do not think it is appropriate to talk about our response to the Select Committee report before our response is published, which will happen shortly. I simply give him the assurance that we are taking the recommendations very seriously. I certainly want to see many of the recommendations embedded in our planning as these matters go forward.

Fishing Vessel Safety

11. **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve fishing vessel safety. [905556]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Fishing safety remains a priority, and we are making improvements through education and legislation. New codes of practice set higher standards and will soon include stability requirements. Globally, the International Maritime Organisation's maritime safety committee will this week discuss the safe operation of fishing vessels operating in the polar regions in the context of the Cape Town agreement.

Andrew Bowie: As everybody who has taken a vessel of any size to sea at any time will know, the International Maritime Organisation is critical to worldwide efforts to ensure safety at sea. The IMO is in fact the only UN agency to be based in the United Kingdom, so what assurances can the Minister give the House that Britain will continue to play an important role in the IMO in the years ahead?

Ms Ghani: I can give my hon. Friend the fullest assurance. Shipping is an international industry, and the UK strongly believes it should be regulated at an international level by the IMO. My officials and I recently played a leading role at the marine environment protection committee, where we secured the landmark

agreement on phasing out greenhouse gas emissions. The UK takes great pride in being the host Government of the IMO, which is based just across the Thames, and we will continue to maintain our active role within the organisation's work for the foreseeable future.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): One of the biggest problems facing fishing vessel safety is boats going to sea undermanned because they cannot get enough crew. Will the Minister use her offices to make a proper assessment of that and pass on her findings to the Home Office to inform its consideration of the opportunities for getting more crew from non-European economic area countries?

Ms Ghani: Trying to encourage, recruit and retain people to work in the fishing, port and shipping sector is a priority for the Department. We know how difficult it is to attract people who are not already in contact with fishing, ports and ships. We are doing what we can to try to encourage people to think of shipping, fishing and working in ports as jobs going forward. We have set up a number of initiatives, especially this year, through the Year of Engineering, to try to get young people interested in being employed in fishing, ports and shipping, and we will share that information with any Department that wishes to see it.

Train Timetable: Hitchin and Harpenden

12. **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to respond to rail passenger concerns on the introduction of the new timetable for peak-time services in Hitchin and Harpenden. [905557]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): The new Thameslink timetable started on Sunday. It brings more frequent and better connected journeys for passengers across London and the south-east. As part of this, rail passengers at Hitchin and Harpenden now have a more regular train service throughout the day than they did previously. The Government, along with the rail industry, are monitoring performance of the new timetable, as well as passenger feedback.

Bim Afolami: On Monday, the first day of the timetable for commuters, 24% of Hitchin's services were cancelled and more than 50% were delayed. Please will the Minister reassure me and my constituents that the Department will do everything it can to force Govia Thameslink to improve its performance drastically or be stripped of its franchise?

Joseph Johnson: We are grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing all the issues facing his constituency to our attention, and we look forward to working closely with him in the coming weeks. This week's timetable changes are the first phase of a totally recast timetable, which will deliver, in time, the full benefits of the £7 billion Thameslink programme.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The new timetable produces winners and losers across the country. Yesterday, the University of Nottingham told me that

"connectivity to London and to the world is crucial to Nottingham attracting jobs, talent and visitors that will drive the future of our economy. We are concerned that the timetable changes will hinder these ambitions."

That is a clear indictment of the changes forced on East Midlands Trains' services by this Department in order to accommodate the new Thameslink timetable. What have this Government got against the east midlands that means that, yet again, we are getting a raw deal?

Joseph Johnson: The May 2018 timetable change will see about 90% of our services change. It is perhaps the single biggest timetable change in the country's history and it will bring an extra 1,300 train services across our network. This is a very significant operational challenge. We recognise the disruption that is temporarily occurring in various places, and we are working carefully with train operators to reduce it as rapidly as possible.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Let me follow up on that question from my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood). Last month, the Secretary of State promised quicker and better train services to Sheffield. As a result of these Thameslink changes, East Midlands Trains says that priority is being given to these new trains on Thameslink services over trains to Sheffield. As a result, peak-time trains to Sheffield are now six to eight minutes slower than they were under the previous timetable—they are slower than they were 10 years ago. Have the Secretary of State's promises of a month ago already been ditched?

Joseph Johnson: The midlands main line changes and efficiency improvements take place in a rolling way up to 2020, which is when the significant benefits to the hon. Gentleman's constituency will start to flow through.

Road Repairs

13. **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): What funds he has recently made available for the repair of local roads.
[905558]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): The Department for Transport is providing just over £6 billion to local highway authorities in England, outside London, for highways maintenance funding from 2015 up to 2021. Of course, my hon. Friend will be aware of the £296 million pothole action fund.

Robert Courts: I welcome the prospect of upgrades to main roads in west Oxfordshire, financed through the housing infrastructure fund and the growth deal, but what are Ministers doing to ensure that small rural roads in areas such as West Oxfordshire, which often bear the brunt of winter damage, are not neglected and are also maintained to a high standard?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point, especially in the light of the recent very bad bouts of weather we have had, which have particularly affected local roads. Until then, it was true that the A and B roads were improving over time but that that leaves out the C and the U roads. A more strategic approach needs to be taken to that, and I am planning to do that in the months to come.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): We have got a brand new road in my constituency and it is supposed to have a vital bus link on it between Hengrove and

Long Ashton, but the West of England metro mayor refuses to use his devolved powers to help make it happen. What is the purpose of devolving powers to a metro mayor if he will not use them?

Jesse Norman: The purpose is to allow him to be held locally accountable by the people who elected him.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The proposal to put a weight limit on the North bridge in Oundle is causing great concern, not only to residents but to businesses and bus service users. I have written to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State about the matter. Will he undertake to see what can be done to make sure that the repairs are carried out as soon as possible?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will know, the North bridge in Oundle falls under the responsibility of Northamptonshire County Council as the highway authority. Since 2015-16, the Department has provided the council with £72 million of local highways maintenance finance, including £12 million this year. That can be used to help to strengthen bridges. It is entirely for the council to determine how that funding is deployed.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): North Lincolnshire's roads and pavements are pitted with potholes. Given what the Minister has just said, should North Lincolnshire Council not be doing a better job of tackling this issue?

Jesse Norman: Of course, these are matters for local authorities in each case, as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out. Our job is to take a more strategic view of the overall picture, which is what I have said we are planning to do.

Leaving the EU: Ports

16. **Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he has taken to prepare UK ports for when the UK leaves the EU.
[905563]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The UK ports sector is in an excellent position to facilitate growth in trade, both from the EU and from other countries, when we leave the EU. Indeed, many of the port operators have exciting plans to do so. Many UK ports have recently invested vigorously in capacity, to handle the largest container ships and to adapt to changing patterns of energy generation. We are seeing investment at crucial ports such as Dover, where the western docks are being developed to enable better use of capacity at the eastern docks to handle ferry traffic.

Anna Turley: Teesport in my constituency is going from strength to strength. It handles 5,000 vessels a year and more than 40 million tonnes of cargo. It is a gateway to the world, but especially to Europe, our largest trading partner. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that Brexit will not result in trading barriers and customs checks, or in lorries queuing down the A66?

Chris Grayling: The Prime Minister has been absolutely clear that this country is committed to frictionless borders. Teesport is doing a great job; I saw some of the firms that operate at the port only recently. That is one reason

why I have announced the study into the potential reopening of the Skipton to Colne railway line, because one thing we lack for ports such as Teesport and, indeed, Liverpool, is better freight connections across the Pennines. Every time I talk to the port operators, that is top of their list.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): One of the Brexit myths is taking control of borders, yet the Secretary of State continues to say that there will be no further checks on transport at ports. Is that just because he does not have a clue about how the Government can put in place a system that allows checks to be made but does not cause carnage on the roads round about the ports?

Chris Grayling: No, I am afraid it is because the hon. Gentleman does not understand how ports operate today. It is not necessary to stop every lorry at a border—indeed, every lorry is not stopped at the border—to have a free flow of trade. Countries inside the European Union and countries that have no connection with the European Union manage to operate a free flow through ports and across borders, and that is what we will do after we leave.

Mr Speaker: I call Clive Efford.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman looks a tad befuddled.

Clive Efford: I was expecting Questions 17 and 18, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The answer—I always like to provide information to satisfy colleagues—is that Question 17 was withdrawn and the person who had Question 18 came in on an earlier question.

Clive Efford: Thank you for enlightening me, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It is very good of the hon. Gentleman to drop in on us; we are deeply obliged to him.

South Eastern Rail Franchise

19. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on passenger safety of the terms of the new south-eastern rail franchise which require some travellers to change trains at Lewisham station. [905566]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that Lewisham is already a fully accessible station. In terms of the total numbers of passengers required to interchange, analysis by Department officials suggests that it may decrease in the next franchise.

Clive Efford: Having been through all the upheaval of the London Bridge refurbishment, my constituents now face fewer choices of London destinations under the new franchise, which means they have to change at Lewisham. The additional development right on top of Lewisham station is going to cause a great deal of congestion there. Will the Minister carry out a safety assessment at Lewisham station to make sure that it is safe for passengers who change at the station in future?

Joseph Johnson: As I said, officials believe that we will see a decrease in the numbers of passengers interchanging at Lewisham station in the next franchise period. It is currently an accessible station, although I recognise that its existing design means that it can get crowded at peak times, as the hon. Gentleman said. In recognition of that, the invitation to tender incentivises bidders to consider investment to improve the flow of passengers at Lewisham. Bidders will be required to spend no less than £6.5 million on station improvements, and Lewisham is one candidate for that spend.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am bound to say that Lewisham station is a very considerable distance from Blaenau Gwent, which the hon. Gentleman represents, but perhaps he has a connection with south-east London of which I am unaware and about which I am shortly to be enlightened. Who knows? I call Mr Nick Smith.

Nick Smith: Rail accessibility is an important topic, so will the £430 million saved by not electrifying the Cardiff to Swansea line still be spent in Wales?

Mr Speaker: Very naughty indeed!

Joseph Johnson: At the time the announcement on electrification was made, we made it clear that we would be looking at a number of schemes to invest in infrastructure and enhancements in Cardiff and Swansea. Those discussions are currently under way.

Topical Questions

T1. [905567] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Before I answer my hon. Friend's question, it might be appropriate for the whole House to express our thanks to all of the transport workers who were involved in the planning and delivery of a smooth journey to and from Windsor last weekend for the royal wedding. It was a very smooth operation and it went gratifyingly well on what was a fantastic day for the country.

Bob Blackman: Drivers on the Jubilee and District lines are threatening all-out strikes on 6 and 14 June, bringing misery to literally millions of Londoners. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning this action, which will put the passengers and commuters of London in a desperate plight, and call on the Mayor of London to intervene to stop this strike?

Chris Grayling: In my view, there is never a justification for industrial action causing that degree of disruption to the lives of individual passengers and of other workers. It is not fair on them; it is the wrong thing to do. Disputes should be solved through means other than strike actions on our public transport system. However, I do remember being informed on regular occasions by the Mayor of London, when we had the troubles on Southern, that he would be much better at coping with these things because there would never be a strike on his watch. He has already broken that one, because he has had them already. It looks like he will have some more.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): This week's timetabling debacle is characteristic of all that is wrong with the railway. The Secretary of State told the press yesterday, and not this House, that Northern Rail issues were his top priority and that he would improve train driver rostering and driver recruitment to improve things, but he cannot simply tinker with rosters and pick new train drivers off a shelf. Does he not realise that it takes a year to train a driver and that roster changes have to be worked through, with the workforce, well ahead of their introduction?

Chris Grayling: First of all, the hon. Gentleman has not been following things too closely, because my recollection is that when I was in this House yesterday afternoon I expressly talked about the issues with the timetabling.

Secondly, Northern does not have a shortage in overall terms of drivers. The problem has been caused by the operational difficulties that resulted from, first, Network Rail's failure to deliver the electrification to the schedule that was expected on the line to Bolton, and, secondly, from Network Rail's failure to finalise timetables in time. That has been the prime reason for disruption, which was not helped, I might add, by an unnecessary work to rule by one of the unions.

What has happened has been unacceptable for passengers, but I also remind the hon. Gentleman that this is the most devolved franchise in England. The management of the franchise is shared by my Department and northern leaders through Rail North, so it is not simply a question of my Department. I will be working now to see whether Rail North together has done enough of a job in monitoring these problems.

Mr Speaker: I do not wish to be unkind to the Secretary of State, and he has certainly given us very full information, but let me say this. I gently chided the Minister next to him, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), for a mildly lengthy reply to one question, but he seems determined to outdo her. It is not a competition. Their replies are extremely informative, and I thank them for that, but we do not have unlimited time, although I do try to extend the envelope.

Andy McDonald: Northern Rail issues may be the Secretary of State's top priority, but what about the long-suffering passengers on Thameslink and Southern? This is the fault not of 400 hard-working timetablers, but of train companies that do not have enough drivers with the right knowledge in the right places at the right time. Is it not the case that these train companies have had years to prepare for this and that this Secretary of State simply trashes the hard-working men and women across the industry who strive to deliver rail improvements? He simply throws them under the bus.

Chris Grayling: If I am not mistaken, the hon. Gentleman has just trashed the hard-working men and women of the train companies, who are trying to do a decent job for passengers; he cannot have it both ways. I am afraid that this is a problem with Network Rail, and I have said that it cannot happen again. We have now had the late delivery of the timetable twice in six months. It is not what I would have expected to happen at this moment in time, with such a big, complex change. None

the less, it is happening because we are running vastly more trains to more destinations. New trains have been running this week, and there are people getting on trains this week who have a seat for the first time in four years. That is a good thing.

T3. [905570] **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): May I impress on Ministers the urgency of upgrades, including redoubling, to the Cotswold line? Will Ministers commit to working with me to ensure that West Oxfordshire sees those upgrades, which it so badly needs?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I am certainly aware of stakeholders' desire for faster and more frequent services along the North Cotswold line between Worcester, Oxford and London. We will continue to provide advice to Lord Faulkner's taskforce as it develops its proposals.

T2. [905569] **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The whole House welcomes the fact that the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill has received Royal Assent. Will the Minister confirm when this important legislation will come into force in Northern Ireland?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The hon. Gentleman is right to welcome this legislation. The misuse of lasers can have very serious consequences, and offenders should face tough penalties for endangering the lives of others. The new offences in relation to maritime and aviation will come into force on 10 July across the entire United Kingdom. As road and rail are devolved to Northern Ireland, these elements of the Act will require a legislative consent motion to be approved by the Northern Ireland Assembly when it returns.

T6. [905574] **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): With increasing house building near the strategic road networks on the edge of Northampton, what steps is the Department taking to finish the second phase of the north-west ring road?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): As part of the local growth deal, the Government have already provided nearly £8 million of funding for the construction of phase 1 of the Northampton north-west relief road. We work closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that investment in this infrastructure and others helps to unlock new homes and create workable, sustainable communities.

T4. [905571] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): The Minister will have seen the major story in *The Times* yesterday, highlighting the problems of licensing and cross-border working in the taxi and private hire industry, and the concerns around public safety. Regrettably, my private Member's Bill—the Licensing of Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Bill—was talked out a few weeks ago. Will the Minister now give the public an assurance that the Government will come forward urgently with legislation to address these concerns?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I also read the story, which was very alarming. He knows that licensing authorities are responsible for

ensuring that taxi drivers are fit and proper, renewing licences and doing criminal record checks. He will also be aware that there is a task and finish group looking at taxis. I am waiting for that group to present its report to me. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I am looking at the issue very closely, as the safety of passengers is a big priority for me.

T7. [905575] **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What recent estimates has the Minister made of the jobs created by High Speed 2? What estimate has been made of the economic benefit to each part of the United Kingdom?

Ms Ghani: I like every opportunity to talk about HS2 and the benefits that it will bring across the country. It is forecast to support about 25,000 new construction jobs and 2,000 apprenticeships during the construction of phase 1 and 2, as well as 3,000 operations and maintenance jobs once the services are running. Economic growth as a result of HS2 is estimated to support the creation of up to 100,000 jobs. HS2 will provide better connectivity to Scotland. This will enable businesses to create new opportunities and people to have better choices of jobs, as well as creating extra capacity for freight.

T5. [905573] **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): International evidence supports road safety targets; we know that they work. The European Commission's new mobility package proposes a target of halving road deaths and serious injuries by 2030. We know that this Government like targets to throw people out of the country, but what is the Minister's position on targets to save the lives of UK citizens?

Jesse Norman: The answer to that question, as the hon. Lady will know, is that there is no correlation between having targets at the national level and the success of a road safety strategy. Many countries that do not have targets have had thoroughly successful road safety strategies. There are many parts of our public realm in which targets can be set by the authorities involved, and we welcome them when they are set.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): A week ago today, the Government announced funding of £83 million for improvements to the north Devon link road. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Indeed—hear, hear. I thank the Minister for that decision. Will he join me in congratulating Devon County Council on the brilliant bid that has got this funding?

Chris Grayling: I am really grateful to Devon County Council for the work it has done. I am also very grateful to my hon. Friend for the arguments that he has brought forward about why this should be a priority. It is a sign of this Government's commitment to the south-west of this country, where we are delivering actual projects that are really essential to local infrastructure and that are long, long overdue.

T8. [905576] **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): This week we were expecting the tender document for the east midlands rail franchise. It has not been forthcoming. When can we expect it, and will it promote investment in the service, including improved services on evenings and weekends?

Chris Grayling: We are just finalising this. I do not know if we have made an announcement on when it is going to come out, but it will come out very shortly. The midland main line is going through the biggest modernisation programme since the 1870s. The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) referred to the question of timetable changes. There have been a number of difficult timetable changes, both in the London area and further up the line. However, this is all paving the way. When this route is completed properly in 2020, when we will have new trains, the railway will be much better than it has been for a century.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What consideration has been given to breaking off the North Cotswold line into a stand-alone franchise once the GWR franchise comes to an end?

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend has raised this with the Department and with me on a number of occasions, and we continue to look at it. It seems, though, that a stand-alone, North Cotswold-line-only franchise would potentially be too small to be sustainable in its own right, as it would be only a small fraction of the size of what is currently the smallest franchise in the network.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Following up on the earlier question about the consultation on community transport licensing, North Norfolk Community Transport has already lost contracts worth half its income during the consultation period because it cannot win any more business due to the fear that hangs over the sector. What steps will the Government take to guarantee the future of these vital community transport links? We fear losing this one.

Jesse Norman: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, we have published guidance making it perfectly clear that local authorities would be acting prematurely if they withdrew or curtailed funding through grants before further guidance, which, as my ministerial colleague has said, we expect to give before the summer.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: It is very good of the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) to drop in on us. We have missed the hon. Gentleman, who was, I think, attending to important business elsewhere, but is now in the bosom of the Chamber. Let's hear the fella.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your indulgence—you have been very kind indeed.

However, one thing that has been less kind to us, sadly, is the timetable changes on GTR and Southeastern. Many people in the constituency I have the privilege to represent, and indeed many in neighbouring areas, are commenting on the lack of capacity taking people into London in the morning and home at night to West Malling, Kings Hill and other places on the Maidstone East line. What will the Government be doing to increase capacity to get in and out of London for these valuable people?

Chris Grayling: I can assure my hon. Friend that there has not been a change to capacity on the Maidstone East line. Some trains on the new timetable are faster and some are slower, but in overall terms the services

will continue to deliver for passengers. Right now, as I explained to the House a little while back, we clearly have initial problems with the new timetable. This is the biggest logistical change that the railways have made for a very long time. My Department is working very closely with all those involved to try to get this sorted out as quickly as possible. But this is all about delivering more services, longer trains and new destinations across the south-east, and once it is bedded in, I think that passengers in his constituency and elsewhere will see the benefits.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State update the House on his invitation for proposals on a southern rail link to Heathrow? This is of great interest to families and businesses in my constituency, with the potential for a direct rail link from Waterloo to Heathrow via Feltham.

Chris Grayling: That is very timely, because after this Question Time session I am going to meet a number of organisations that are interested in participating in this project. As the hon. Lady knows, we are going to deliver a massive improvement to service access around Heathrow. Western access will be delivered through the control period 6 process, and I aim for southern access to be a privately funded project. This has enormous potential to link not just Waterloo to Heathrow but to link parts of the south-west network through Heathrow on to Paddington.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, 2018 is the Year of Engineering. As my local contribution to that, I am organising an engineering showcase in Basildon town centre on 14 July. Will he encourage other Members to consider doing a similar thing in their own constituency? May I also invite him to come and join us to celebrate all the fantastic engineering going on in Basildon?

Chris Grayling: I am really grateful to my hon. Friend for the work he is doing as our ambassador for the Year of Engineering. He is a tower of strength in making this a successful year. We have hundreds of firms involved around the country, and I encourage other Members to take advantage of what he is doing and to lay on an event for new students in their constituency this autumn, as I will. This is a great opportunity to unite the whole House in saying that engineering is a great profession and we need more young people to go into it.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Approximately two months ago, I asked the Secretary of State for a meeting with the Newton people who, because of HS2, are going to see more than 30 houses knocked down in their small village. Has the meeting been arranged yet?

Ms Ghani: I know that HS2 Ltd has put in place community managers who are meeting communities up and down the line. HS2 Ltd is also hosting regular meetings here in Parliament, at which Members can make representations on behalf of their constituents. We must not forget that HS2 will bring more than £92 billion of benefit across the whole country. HS2 Ltd is available here in Parliament and also in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, if he so wishes.

Mr Skinner: The Secretary of State agreed the meeting.

Mr Speaker: Well, the hon. Gentleman can always table a question asking when the meeting will be. That is a hint.

Mr Skinner: It was a fortnight ago when he agreed.

Mr Speaker: I note that, and I think that it will be on the record.

Chris Grayling: I do not think the hon. Gentleman's office has been in touch.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the matter will be sorted out ere long; I very much hope it will.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Network Rail is responsible for Ayr railway station in my constituency, which has important links with Stranraer and Glasgow. The functionality and passenger safety at that station is under threat due to the derelict state of the nearby Station Hotel, which is privately owned. May I urge my right hon. Friend to encourage Network Rail to seriously engage with the owners of that hotel and the local council, to avoid a catastrophic event at Ayr railway station?

Chris Grayling: First, there is no question but that we are very happy to have a meeting between Ministers and the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner). If his office gets in touch, we will sort that.

On my hon. Friend's question, I would like to find out a bit more detail, because clearly we would like to ensure that that problem does not exist. If he provides a bit more detail to myself or my hon. Friend the rail Minister, we will get on to the case.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The recent court case that found the collection of tolls at the Mersey crossing unlawful has afforded Ministers an opportunity to pause and review the operation of those tolls, which are hated across my region. Will they take that opportunity and review the tolls?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the road has been extraordinarily successful and is a great example of a piece of newly funded infrastructure. That issue is primarily for Halton Borough Council, but we are following the situation closely.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Residents in Uplawmoor are currently campaigning against proposed airspace changes at Glasgow airport. I very much welcome the Department's decision to move that process on to the new Civil Aviation Authority guidelines, but does the Secretary of State agree that it is vital that airports carry out meaningful consultation with affected communities and do not try to bamboozle and bludgeon them into submission with technical jargon that they cannot understand?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The management of airspace and flight paths is extraordinarily sensitive for local communities. Airports that engage well have a much easier time, and those that do not engage properly pay a price. I agree that community engagement is really important.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): When the east coast railway franchise is once again open to bids, will the bidding process include a prosperity weighting clause, in keeping with proposals for some defence contracts?

Chris Grayling: When we form the London North Eastern Railway in its final form, as I have said, it will not be a conventional franchise bidding process. It will move to a completely new approach, as I set out in my statement earlier this month, and we will bring more details to the House about the shape of that in due course.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I know the Secretary of State shares my excitement about the fact that in July we will see the first new Hitachi trains on a booked service west of Taunton. Will he update us about the wider progress being made with the new Great Western franchise, particularly about the idea that it may be split?

Chris Grayling: I have now got back the responses to the consultation, and I am carefully considering my response to them. I give my hon. Friend an assurance

that I have a fairly clear message from the people who responded, and I will take that view very carefully into account in how I take this forward.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): When will the Government stand up for small towns in the shires of this country? While the cities get new trains and powers over bus services, the small towns in the heartlands, such as Lancashire, get nothing. This Government do not seem to care about small towns.

Chris Grayling: It is nice to finish with a degree of hokum from the Opposition. Lancashire has benefited, for example, from the Heysham relief road—connecting two smaller centres in a way that is absolutely vital if we are to unlock parts of the economy—and, starting later this year, all the small towns in Lancashire are getting new trains. Once we have bedded in the timetable and overcome these infuriating problems, the Northern Rail franchise will deliver more services in Lancashire—and, indeed, in Copeland, where my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who has now gone, had the pleasure last weekend of travelling on the west Cumbria line's first Sunday service in decades.

Mr Speaker: That is very useful to know. Thank you.

Marks & Spencer

10.41 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the implications of the decision of Marks & Spencer to close 14 branches across the United Kingdom.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I welcome the chance to address the House on this matter. I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her chairmanship of the all-party group on textile and fashion, and I commiserate with her on the fact that one of the stores that will be closing is in her constituency.

Who among us is not touched by the hand of M&S? I counted up this morning, and I am in fact wearing three items of M&S clothing—I will not declare what they are. Indeed, my breakfast this morning entirely comprised items bought at the Gatwick M&S after a late-night flight. By the way, I defy anyone in the House not to say that they have at least one item of clothing in their wardrobe from that fine retailer. This is, however, a worrying time.

As the hon. Lady said, Marks & Spencer made an announcement on Tuesday about 14 of its UK stores. This is part of a well-advertised plan to reshape its estates and, essentially, to reshape its stores to compete, given the very big challenges of many online retailers in the country. Five of the stores will close this year or early next year, and all colleagues at those locations will be offered redeployment to other stores. Nine other stores have been proposed for closure, and Marks & Spencer has entered a period of consultation on the redeployment of staff in those stores. All of us will of course recognise that this is a worrying time for the over 600 staff members currently going through that process. I know that there will be concern among Members on both sides of the House about this issue. The Government—the Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus—will of course stand by, should support be required, to work with the company.

There have been a number of announcements in the retail sector recently—negative and also positive in terms of job creation. We should all recognise the incredible contribution of this sector to the UK economy—it was almost £95 billion in 2016—and this Government's ongoing support for the sector. We have announced measures worth more than £2 billion over the next five years to cut business rates, with a positive change to the indexation of business rates.

Only this March, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), set up the Retail Sector Council, which is determined to drive up this sector's productivity and ensure that it is fit to face future challenges. Sitting on the sector council are retailers—large and small; online and offline; in town and out of town—and the unions are of course very much a part of that process. The object of the council is for the Government and industry to work together to drive up productivity, and also to secure our fantastic retail sector's future health and direction. We are working

together on the requirements to make sure that productivity and economic growth in this sector can continue for many years to come.

Mr Speaker: I must just say—I probably do not have to, but I will do so anyway—that I share the Minister's enthusiasm for Marks & Spencer, which is a most admirable institution. What she said about almost every Member having an item or more from Marks is incontrovertible.

Dr Cameron: I thank the Minister for her response.

Over the past few years, there has been a cascade of commercial announcements from well-known companies saying that iconic retail high street stores need to close if they are to cut costs: British Home Stores, Mothercare, Toys R Us, the Royal Bank of Scotland and now Marks & Spencer. As chair of the all-party group on textile and fashion, I know that the market is changing, but retail companies need to strike a balance between remaining competitive and understanding the wider implications of closing landmark stores. Marks & Spencer's proposed store closures—14 imminently, and more than 100 in the next few years—will not only result in thousands of potential job losses, but could devastate our local town centres. It is well known that when anchor stores close, the surrounding subsidiary stores feel the impact of reduced footfall, meaning that many close as well.

Are our high streets to become ghost towns? My constituency has already felt the effects of BHS closures, and we expect to lose 67 jobs if the Marks & Spencer closes. Has the Department made any assessment of the impact of the proposed closures on local economies in Scotland and across the UK? What is the impact on disabled people who find it difficult to travel to outskirt retail parks to shop? Since the report by Mary Portas on saving the high street that the Government commissioned in 2011, how many of its recommendations have been implemented? Finally, will the Minister agree to meet jointly with the all-party group, MPs affected and representatives from Marks & Spencer to facilitate further consultation on these proposals, and to consider desperately needed plans to save our high streets?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady raises some valid points—there is an M&S food shop in my Devezes constituency—and is right that attractive stores bring in footfall from which subsidiary stores benefit. Of course, the Government have taken forward many plans to support the high street, which is part of the reason for the rate changes. Local councils, which might be responsible for setting parking policy, rely on parking receipts to fund other transport services, but if those rates are remitted straight back to Westminster, their desire to create a more attractive parking and retail culture might be diminished, which is why it is important that our rate localisation policy proceeds. I hope that the Scottish National party will support it.

The hon. Lady asked whether an assessment had been made. There are ongoing assessments. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton, who sends his apologies for not being present, would be the person to take that meeting. I would not like to speak on behalf of his diary, but I shall make sure that the hon. Lady's representations are put to him. He is working

tirelessly on this issue across Government even while our retail sector continues to thrive and grow. As she will know from her work on the all-party group, there have been several important announcements in the last few weeks: Amazon has announced the creation of 400 jobs; Lidl has announced the creation of 40 new stores; and ASOS, an amazing online store employing thousands of people in call centre and support capacities, has seen its sales grow by 30% this year—it is becoming a truly global brand.

There is definitely a rotation in the way in which we all shop. I am sure that we all now buy many more of our unmentionable items online—sometimes we even buy them in stores—but the hon. Lady makes some valid points. We should all think hard about what we can do as individuals, particularly to support our local authorities, which are often responsible for planning, decision making, rates setting and parking decisions, all of which can have a material impact on the high street experience.

I will take away the hon. Lady's request and make sure that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary responds to her. I assure her that the reason for setting up the Retail Sector Council—it includes all sorts of retailers, from farm shops to large online companies, and of course the vital Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, which is providing so much support to workers in the industry—is to make sure that these conversations can be had on a cross-Government basis, and that policy making can be joined-up.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I must declare an interest: I am wearing a Marks & Spencer suit, although I do not want to give the House the impression that I am the fashion icon for Marks & Spencer.

Does the Minister agree that it is not all bad? Marks & Spencer has opened a massive store at Rushden Lakes in my constituency. It is hugely successful and employs lots of people. The store is a mixture of retail and leisure. It might just be that times are changing and Marks & Spencer is changing with them.

Mr Speaker: In relation to the first part of the hon. Gentleman's inquiry I say simply this: so am I, and neither do I.

Claire Perry: Perhaps there will be a competition at the end of these proceedings to judge who wears M&S best—I am declining all responsibility for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) makes an important point. Companies such as Marks & Spencer, John Lewis and other major retailers have embraced this change and worked out how to be fit for the future. Sadly, in other companies—BHS, for example—the corporate management and the level of responsibility that were taken did not prepare the chain adequately for that change, meaning that many jobs were lost. Addressing that is partly the responsibility of the Retail Sector Council.

I appreciate that changes to jobs can be worrying for the more than 600 staff involved, but it is great that one of our iconic British retail chains is prepared to embrace the future, invest, and ensure that it can continue selling us the things that all of us—old and young—would like to buy. I will declare a final interest: I have about 12 Marks & Spencer jackets. They are the perfect

combination of cheap and bright, meaning that I could catch your eye, Mr Speaker, when I was standing on the Back Benches.

Mr Speaker: Truly the Minister is a woman of the people.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): My suit is from an independent retailer in my constituency, not from M&S.

The Press Association reported last month that 21,000 retail jobs were at risk in the first three months of the year, with administrations at Maplin and Toys R Us, and store closures at New Look, House of Fraser and Carpetright. We now learn that M&S is to close 14 branches this year, and 100 stores by 2022. As we express our fond memories of M&S, may we remember that 872 members of staff will lose their jobs? We need some sobriety in the proceedings here.

High street retailers struggle to compete against out-of-town and online shopping, given their lower cost base, and that is not helped by the long-term squeeze on incomes under this Government. The Government have their much-trumpeted industrial strategy, but where is the retail sector deal? How do they propose to help the affected communities and high streets? The Government must go much further on business rates because the changes simply have not cut through to make the difference needed by high street retailers. What conversations have the Minister and her colleagues had this year with trade unions that represent retail workers?

Unless the Government are prepared to step in to secure a level playing field between our high streets, and online and out-of-town retailers, more shops will close, more high streets will lose key big-name brands, more communities will lose out, and more workers will lose their jobs. The Marks & Spencer closures show that leaving market forces to their own devices is simply not working, and the Government must ensure that there is a fair market in retail for the good of businesses, workers, communities and our high streets.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman and I are in violent agreement. That is why the establishment of the Retail Sector Council, which absolutely involves store worker representatives, is vital. A series of financial measures has been taken forward. The Government have given almost £20 million to towns funding initiatives such as the Great British High Street. We have established the Future High Streets Forum, which is chaired by the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), and that also involves retailers. More than £2 billion of measures were introduced in the autumn Budget to cut business rates, including the 100% small business rate relief that is so vital to independent retailers.

Bill Esterson: It is not working.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman says that, but he bought his suit from an independent retailer, which will no doubt have benefited from that—[*Interruption.*] He should have bought more suits there, Mr Speaker.

One point that has not been raised is that there is an unfairness in the current structure of online and offline retailing because of the way in which retailers pay VAT.

[*Claire Perry*]

That is an issue for us all, and it is why online prices can be much lower. We are therefore bringing forward a review into the wider taxation of the digital economy to ensure that international corporation tax rules are fair, and that sellers that operate across online and offline marketplaces pay an appropriate amount of value added tax.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I assure my right hon. Friend that she is indeed a fashion icon in her M&S outfits.

This sad announcement by M&S, particularly for the people who work there, puts further pressure on our high streets, on top of the correct announcement on betting regulations and the trend towards online shopping. Will my right hon. Friend redouble her efforts, and that of her Department, to ensure the vitality and diversity of our high streets up and down the land?

Claire Perry: Most assuredly. Working with high streets in my constituency, as I am sure many right hon. and hon. Members do, I know there is a huge power in having a vibrant high street sector with lots of shops and big anchor tenants, and perhaps also, as a way of driving footfall, shops where people pick up their online packages. Our high streets are part of our incredibly vibrant history. Many of us represent small market towns where the high street is a hugely important part of the local economy. Let us not forget that they employ hundreds of thousands of people right across the country.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): All this is terrible news for our local retailers and for businesses on our local high streets. We have lost a staggering number of businesses over the past two or three years. It is terrible news for the employees and their families, and for our local economy. In my constituency, we will lose about 90 employees, which will have a devastating impact. Is it due to a combination of the Government's austerity and the clicks versus bricks regarding VAT rates, which we have just spoken about? I know that the Government were planning a consultation on VAT. Will the Minister update us on where we are with that consultation? Is there any possibility, as I asked the Chancellor some time ago, of reducing VAT for our high streets to give local shops and high street retailers a fighting chance against online retailers?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman anticipates the review I hope we can all support. I will ensure that my hon. Friends in the Treasury bring it forward as soon as possible. I do have to push back slightly. The hon. Gentleman is right and wrong. He is right that we are buying less stuff. In fact, there is the phrase "peak stuff", which suggests that the younger folks among us no longer go shopping for pleasure, but prefer to do other things with their time—mostly involving their phones, as best I can tell from my own kids. There is the view that the acquisition of products and services is on the decline globally. I believe the vacancy rate for shops in great cities such as New York is now in double digit figures, which is very surprising and reflects a global trend.

We should welcome the fact that in this country real wages are now going up and increasing ahead of inflation. People are getting more money in their pockets. The

Government's actions in cutting taxes by over £1,000 for over 3 million people and in continuing to invest in high streets, allowing both money and choice, has meant that spending has held up reasonably well—in particular, since the Brexit referendum, which was supposed to deliver the death knell to shopping in this country. That has not happened. We are seeing a change in the way people spend, but it is vital we recognise the importance of this sector as part of our industrial strategy going forward. Industrial strategy, by the way, does not just mean smokestack industries. It means retail industries and creative industries—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) should welcome the fact that we have a sector council up and running and should look closely at the steps it suggests the Government need to take.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I speak as a former Marks & Spencer supplier and current Marks & Spencer customer. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) highlighted the importance of an anchor store to a town's retail offer and the social importance of the high street. I entirely agreed with her question. Will my right hon. Friend remain vigilant on, or at least sensitive to, the impact of business rates for physical retailers as compared to internet retailers? Will she monitor that carefully, because we want to ensure a level playing field for the social benefit we have been talking about?

Claire Perry: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. We have tolerated that difference for too long. It is right to have a fair allocation of VAT between both channels.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): It cannot be fair for our high street retailers to have to compete with online companies that offshore themselves for tax purposes and often use the most exploitative employment practices, such as minimum hours contracts. The Government have to act more urgently to deal with this problem. Does the Minister really think that if an employee loses their job at Marks & Spencer and goes to work for a company like Amazon, they will be given the same rate of pay?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman flags up the reason that the Government commissioned the Taylor review on the future of good work: clearly, the workplace is changing. The expectation, and it has been pleasing to hear Marks & Spencer talk about this, is that it will do everything it can to redeploy its workforce, particularly into stores nearby that might be transitioning to food. I have been very struck on my forays into M&S by its incredible investment in its workforce—its commitment to increasing diversity and to providing good jobs over the long term—and we must all work to make sure that those jobs continue.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I declare an interest as a former supplier to Marks & Spencer, and I am still involved in—but not paid by—the company that supplies Marks & Spencer. It is one of the most innovative retailers. It trains its staff, as other people have mentioned, and is a huge supporter of the British food industry. However, north-eastern Scotland has had to withstand 50% of the business rates increase, so I ask the Minister—

[*Interruption.*] I ask her whether that increase in business rates can be justified and to be very conscious that business rates are damaging the high street, particularly as we are seeing in Scotland—[*Interruption.*]

Claire Perry: Mr Speaker, you can tell by the vigorous debate on this point the importance of having local government and national Government—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There are very unseemly exchanges between Scottish National party Members and Government Back Benchers. All should be united in wanting to listen to the reply from the Minister of State.

Claire Perry: This vigorous exchange points to the responsibility that we all bear—Westminster, national and local governments—for supporting our high streets and not using short-term measures, particularly tax-raising measures, that might further drive out the precious high street stores that we are all so interested in protecting.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the Minister tell us whether the closures will affect any Marks & Spencer hospital branches? If she is meeting the company, will she raise the scandal of the higher prices in these shops than in high street shops? When I met the company over two years ago, it flatly refused to match the promise of WHSmith by ending premium prices in hospitals. I hope that the Minister agrees that this is absolutely exploitative and must stop.

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady raises a fantastic point. We were all so shocked to see that practice; it seemed to be a terrible example of predatory pricing. My understanding is that no hospital shops are closing, but I will certainly ensure that the issue is raised by the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton. This practice must end.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Regrettably, Marks & Spencer chose to leave Rugby town centre a couple of years ago, but the good news is that it relocated to a much larger edge-of-town site at Elliot's Field and is able to offer a much more extensive range. Does the Minister agree that this announcement means that it is important for retailers to work with developers and local authorities to continue to enhance and improve the retail experience?

Claire Perry: I absolutely do. The work that so many do on an unsung basis in our neighbourhood planning process should take into account these issues: how do we create vibrant centres where people want to live, work and travel to, and which mean we have a very vibrant high street sector? If you will indulge me for one minute, Mr Speaker, Marks & Spencer has been a leading company in its drive for zero-emissions activity. It was one of the first companies in the sector to set up such a plan. It has done amazing work with its supply chain and stores to reduce carbon emissions and sell sustainable products. I really do applaud it for that.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): This is a very worrying time for Marks & Spencer's employees. I was therefore very pleased to be able to support my excellent store in Sutton by buying this suit there a

month or so ago. While I agree with the Minister that people's purchasing habits are changing, does she agree that inevitably, the report from Mark Carney that household incomes are now £900 lower than had been predicted before the EU referendum will have had an impact on Marks & Spencer? Does she also agree that if "max fac" is introduced, a £32.50 charge for every shipment, given that Marks & Spencer operates in 23 out of 28 EU countries, will also have a significant impact on it and the retail business generally?

Claire Perry: I am not going to comment on hypotheticals, both pre and post Brexit, in terms of the impact on the economy. However, the right hon. Gentleman points out the absolute requirement both to satisfy the referendum result, in terms of leaving the European Union, and to ensure that we have as close and as frictionless a trading relationship as possible, so that we do not see food prices or the prices of goods and services going up for these very integrated operators in the UK.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for raising the issue of accessibility to the high street. I have witnessed the closure of shops in the high streets in my constituency and the movement away from high streets towards out-of-town parks, and I think we should try to stop that.

Companies in my constituency are paying some of the highest business rates in Europe, and, obviously, Scotland's business growth is below that of the rest of the United Kingdom. May I ask the Minister to work with me and with other colleagues—on a cross-party basis, if needs be—and with the devolved Administrations to increase business growth in Scotland, so that we can at least match the rest of the United Kingdom?

Claire Perry: Absolutely.

My hon. Friend referred to disability access, and I think we still need to do more about that. We must bear in mind that it is not enough for companies simply to relocate out of town if people need cars or some other form of transport to get there.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): High streets throughout the country will be the poorer for this decision. Retail closures are coming thick and fast now. May I press the Minister on one point? When will we see a change in VAT rules that will help our local shops?

Claire Perry: As my hon. Friend—for he is a friend—knows, it is an unwise Minister who pre-empts a Treasury announcement, so I will not be tempted. But I think that we should focus on the fact that through such actions we can end up with a thriving great British company that is able to compete in the 21st century and to maintain its stores. We have seen too many great British names go under, partly because their managements did not make the right decisions and did not think enough about their staff in the long term.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow

[Paul Masterton]

(Dr Cameron) for securing the urgent question. The closure of the store in East Kilbride will also affect communities in my constituency such as Waterfoot and Eaglesham, where some of its staff live.

One of the problems with high street policy is that it involves a complicated mix of local government, devolved government and Westminster government, with often competing priorities. Will the industrial strategy present an opportunity for some combined thinking, so that we can develop good national policies that will ensure that our high streets can thrive?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend has made clear exactly why the industrial strategy—which, as I have said, sounds a bit “smokestacky”—is actually focused on industries such as retail and hospitality, in which we know we must increase productivity and in which so many hundreds of thousands of staff, many of them women, are employed. That is why the sector council was set up. It has existed for only six weeks, but it has already had several very productive sessions. Ultimately, this is why the move to local industrial strategies, working with local enterprise partnerships and devolved Administrations—[*Interruption.*] Goodness me. Members are very shouty across the Chamber today. We have already had a discussion about politeness.

Mr Speaker: As I said a few moments ago, there is too much shouting between Conservative Back Benchers and members of the Scottish National party. The Minister must be heard. If Members want to squabble, they should not squabble when a Minister, a shadow Minister or anyone else is on his or her feet. Let us hear the answers.

Claire Perry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will endeavour to be brief.

It is vital for us to develop the national industrial strategy and to make it local, ensuring that mayors, devolved Administrations, local councils and local enterprise partnerships are involved in these decisions.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): As we know, the retail sector predominantly employs women. What can the Government do to support them during this process and to ensure that they are not disproportionately affected by the closures?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman is right—retail is very much a female employment sector, often because women are working part time—but he and I should celebrate the fact that there are more women in work than at any time since records began and that the gender pay gap is at its lowest-ever level.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) made some very valid points, but let us be clear about one thing: M&S is changing its business model in response to changing customer needs, behaviour and desires, and it has survived since 1884 precisely because it continues to do that. Revenues are up—let us not paint a picture of gloom and doom—but profits are challenged, so what is happening is perfectly

fair and reasonable. Does the Minister agree that we must ensure that there is a level playing field between online and offline on the high street?

Claire Perry: Yes.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Does the Minister—for whom I have the greatest respect—accept that small towns have been hardest hit by these and previous closures and that central and local government policy is partly responsible? In Accrington, for example, hundreds of jobs have been lost, either as a result of council redundancies or because the Government have relocated public services to bigger towns or cities. Hundreds of well-paid workers have been taken out of town centres, and that has affected retailers such as Marks & Spencer.

Claire Perry: Our two constituencies share similar characteristics. There is a very complex mix. People’s working and commuting patterns are changing, and their mobility is different. The hon. Gentleman has his brand-new trains coming, which might encourage more people to out-commute from the market towns. There is a complex series of problems, and they cannot all be solved in Westminster; they need national Governments, local governments, local economic partnerships and industry working together, and the great thing about the industrial strategy is that it is the first time that I can remember that industry and the Government have sat down and defined what they need to do to drive up their productivity, to make sure there are good jobs in these sectors, both in central towns and smaller towns for the future.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in the internet age, car parking charges in town centres make it more difficult for retailers both large and small and that local authorities might wish to reconsider them?

Claire Perry: As my hon. Friend knows, that is a difficult issue because local authorities rely on that revenue stream to fund other services, including buses in my constituency, and that is why the localisation of the rates, allowing local authorities to have more revenue from driving up activity in the high street and therefore rates revenue from the high streets, cannot come soon enough.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her response to the urgent question. What consideration has been given to possible management and staff takeovers—such as by establishing co-operatives—of individual shops marked for closure? What discussions has the Minister had with Marks & Sparks in relation to that, and what help can the Minister and the Government give to help that happen?

Claire Perry: There has been close contact with Marks & Spencer at Government level to understand what is happening. There is also now a period of serious consultation between the company, unions and staff affected in those stores to make sure there is the best possible outcome for all.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Kettering's Marks & Spencer shop is one of the 14 whose closure has been announced, and this is very bad news for local shoppers in Kettering who use the store and in particular for the 58 employees. The decision is even more bemusing given that Kettering sits in one of the fastest growing areas in the UK, with new houses going up all the time and the population increasing at a rapid rate. Will the Minister ensure that large retailers like Marks & Spencer are fully apprised of housing growth plans, because they might be making their decisions on incorrect information?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend makes an important point and I will certainly make sure the Department ensures those pieces of information are shared, and of course a consultation is now under way—that was announced yesterday—with the stores affected and there might be new pieces of information that have not been thought about that should be used.

Business of the House

11.12 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 4 June will include:

MONDAY 4 JUNE—Second Reading of the Ivory Bill.

TUESDAY 5 JUNE—Second Reading of the Non-Domestic Rating (Nursery Grounds) Bill, followed by general debate on NATO.

WEDNESDAY 6 JUNE—There will be a debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 7 JUNE—Debate on a motion on ending tuberculosis followed by general debate on early elections, human rights and the political situation in Turkey. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 8 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

I am delighted to announce that the Ivory Bill will have its Second Reading on the first day back after recess. When I was Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, protecting the world's much loved elephants was a big priority for me, and I am sure many will share this enthusiasm and welcome the introduction of this Bill.

With regards to important Brexit legislation, I am confident I will be able to update the House on these Bills shortly, in the usual way. I will make sure the House can make swift progress in a matter of weeks, not months, in preparing for our new relationship with our friends and neighbours in the EU.

This week we have heard incredibly moving accounts given by courageous survivors and their families at the Grenfell inquiry. We are committed to getting to the bottom of this tragedy and achieving justice for the victims.

This week has also marked a year since the Manchester Arena terrorist attack. The attack on innocent and vulnerable people was appalling and we stand with them in our determination to never let terrorism succeed.

Finally, may I take this opportunity to wish everyone a restful Whitsun recess?

Valerie Vaz: May I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the forthcoming business and for her statement? I say to her gently, however, that by making a statement she eats into the time for right hon. and hon. Members to ask questions, so perhaps she should provide statements at the end, when she is the last person to speak.

The forthcoming business is very light and no Lords amendments are expected for when the House next sits—[*Interruption.*] I will take longer if Government Members keep chuntering. Will the Leader of the House confirm what the Government Chief Whip said to the 1922 committee, namely that the European Union (Withdrawal Bill) will be back on 11 June? It seems that the respected journalist Faisal Islam is announcing House business: he has tweeted about the withdrawal Bill, the trade Bill and the customs Bill, and that there will be a debate on 11 June. Will the Leader of the House confirm whether he is the new virtual Leader of the House? Will the trade Bill and customs Bill, which should by now have passed Report stage and Third

[Valerie Vaz]

Reading, be debated on 11 June? I am asking the Leader of the House rather than Faisal Islam. Will she confirm whether any of the Bills relating to Europe will be debated in this place—she obviously cannot talk about the other place—before the European Council meeting scheduled for 28 and 29 June?

It is unprecedented to treat Parliament in this way, with business being announced in the media, not in the House. Surely Democratic Unionist party Members do not want to prop up a Government who treat Parliament in such a way—short-termist, limping from one week to the next.

Brexit is so important. We need to take time to consider the proposals, in the best interests of the country. However, yesterday's session of the Treasury Committee heard that the Government still have not worked out the customs arrangements. It is no wonder that the Tory party has to have a loyalty scheme to try to attract young people. This is about the interests of young people and the future of this country.

Where are the hon. Members for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and for Stone (Sir William Cash)?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I'm here!

Valerie Vaz: They have been calling for parliamentary sovereignty, but why have we not heard in this House when we will debate the Bills? [Interruption.] I will take longer.

What about a debate on the fact that the number of French, Belgian and Dutch companies registered 48%, 38% and 52% fewer businesses respectively in 2016-17 than in the previous year, and that there was a 90% collapse in foreign investment in the UK last year compared with 2016?

If the Government are too afraid to debate any Bill with the letters "EU" in it, how about heeding the words of the Prime Minister:

"to make Britain a country that works for everyone and not just the privileged few";

or, to put it the other way—the way we put it—for the many, not the few? Perhaps, therefore, we could have a debate on the report by Professor Peter Dwyer of the University of York, who tracked claimants over five years and said:

"The outcomes from sanctions are almost universally negative."

Or what about a debate on the social injustice of the growing number of homeless people being fined, given criminal convictions or even being imprisoned? A judge said:

"I will be sending a man to prison for asking for food when he was hungry".

Or what about a debate on "Still Dying on the Inside", a report by the charity Inquest? Most women who go to prison—84% of them—do so for non-violent offences, and two thirds of women in prison are mothers of dependent children. Where is the Government's commitment to social justice?

And what about the head of Motability, whose salary is more than 10 times that of the Prime Minister? He can afford to buy a top of the range car, but I have had to write to him about constituents who have had their

cars taken away, and some of them cannot even walk while waiting for their assessments. He has had support from the Government through tax breaks.

We have had the chaotic situation of the Government standing to support the Opposition in the application made by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for an emergency Standing Order No. 24 debate on his constituency boundaries Bill, when all that was needed was a money resolution. The hon. Member for North East Somerset said that the quote I gave from "Erskine May" did not apply to private Members' Bills, but I have taken advice and found that it applies both to Government Bills and to private Members' Bills. Indeed, the Standing Orders that he himself mentioned apply to both.

I want to raise another House matter, raised last week by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), about the post office counter in Members' Lobby. Will the Leader of the House use her best offices to talk to the Chair of the Administration Committee to ensure that Members are consulted about the closure of that counter, because they have not been. It is very useful to have it there, particularly if there are queues in Central Lobby.

Finally, will the Leader of the House confirm, following the wonderful wedding last week and the performance by the gospel choir, that the Prime Minister is now singing that Ben E. King classic, "Stand by Me"? I, too, wish everyone a happy Whitsun break.

Andrea Leadsom: "Dear Pot... Yours, Kettle" springs to mind. The hon. Lady asked me to be swifter in making the business statement and then said that she would waffle on for ever—and she did.

The hon. Lady asks about the business that was discussed, and I made it very clear that I aim to bring back the very important Brexit legislation within weeks. She will know that in this place discussions take place and the business is announced through very long-standing conventions through the usual channels, and that is indeed the case on this occasion. There has been no announcement to any committee through any private meeting. There has not been any announcement.

Secondly, the hon. Lady asks about the customs arrangements, and she will be aware that the discussions are ongoing. The Government have been very clear that we are seeking the best possible deal for the United Kingdom and for our EU friends and neighbours as we leave the European Union. That we will continue to do. It means that we are constantly considering the best alternatives with the best information that is available at the time. We will continue to do that, because, rather than playing politics with it, trying to score points day in, day out and undermining the will of the people, the Government are determined to ensure that we get the best possible deal that we can.

The hon. Lady asks about the economy, and she suggests that it is struggling, so she might like to welcome the fact that employment is up to another record high, unemployment is down to a 40-year low, real wages are rising, and UK exports rose by nearly 10% in the last year to a new record high. She might like to welcome the fact that the highest growth in investment spending in the G7 last year came to the United Kingdom. She might like to welcome the fact that our day-to-day

spending is in surplus for the first time in 16 years, and certainly since her Government were in power in 2001 and 2002. She might also like to welcome the lowest net borrowing in over a decade. I am sure that she will not welcome any of those things, but what we on this side of the House focus on is giving more people the security of a job and a pay packet to give themselves and their families a better life.

Also, the hon. Lady talks about inequality and how unfair life is, and she might like to welcome the national living wage, introduced by this Government. Last month, we increased the national living wage by 4.4%—inflation busting and the equivalent of an annual pay rise of more than £2,000 for a full-time worker since its introduction. She might like to welcome the fact that basic rate taxpayers are £1,000 better off than in 2010 as a direct result of our changes to the personal tax-free allowance. She might also like to welcome the fact that the basic state pension is now more than £1,450 a year higher than it was in 2010. But as I say, I do not expect the hon. Lady to welcome the real improvements in people's lives under a Conservative Government that balances the need to keep the economy in good shape with the ability to pay for public services.

The hon. Lady asks about the legislative programme. What I can say to her is that 31 Bills have been introduced so far, 17 of which have been sent for Royal Assent. Hundreds of statutory instruments have been passed by each House. Seven draft Bills have been published and there are six Brexit Bills before Parliament at this time. That is not by any means a small legislative programme. Perhaps the hon. Lady simply has not noticed.

As for the post office counter, as I said last week to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), I am delighted to take up the issue of its opening times. I have already asked the chief executive of the House authorities to respond to Members who want to raise the issue and to ensure that when services to Members are under question, consultation takes place with all Members. I hope that I have answered all the hon. Lady's lengthy questions.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): May we have a debate on how the independent complaints procedure for this House is progressing?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that Members continue to work very hard cross-party on building an independent complaints procedure that will genuinely change the culture in this place for the better, making sure that everybody, right across the Palace of Westminster—whoever they are and whatever job they do—will be treated with the courtesy, dignity and respect which is their due.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for the next sitting week. I very much endorse and support her comments on Manchester and Grenfell.

This has been the week in which clueless fantasy finally caught up with hard reality, as we have found that the Government's "unicorn and rainbow" technological solution to the border in Ireland will cost £20 billion—£7 billion more than we paid into the EU in 2016—and the leave guru Dominic Cummings has said that the "wiring of power in Downing Street is systemically dysfunctional"

and that there are no "real preparations" for leaving the EU. May we have a proper, realistic statement on where we are with Brexit, free of any of the delusional fantasy we are usually served up? Can we have a sense of how much this chaotic cluelessness will cost us?

There is nothing in the business statement about the return of the repeal Bill from the House of Lords. When should we expect to see the Bill? Can we have a categorical assurance that the Leader of the House will not simply lump all the Lords amendments together into one package to try to curtail debate and voting? These are important measures that we have to consider probably for the first time. Can we have a categorical assurance that this Government will not revert to type and try to close down debate, scrutiny and votes?

Yesterday was quite encouraging: we had two votes on Opposition motions. We are now seeing a little more Government engagement with Opposition day debates, which is all down to the threat of withdrawing ministerial salaries and releasing Cabinet papers, but can we not just go back to where we were, when the Opposition tabled motions for debate and then the House voted? Why do we have to go through all this rigmarole just to get this Government to vote?

Lastly, Mr Speaker, I wish you and all the staff of the House a very happy and relaxing Whitsun recess. We all look forward to coming back for a proper debate on the Lords amendments to the repeal Bill.

Andrea Leadsom: I always enjoy the hon. Gentleman's passion for these matters, which is extremely welcome. I am sure he will have listened very carefully when I said we will be bringing the withdrawal Bill back to this place within weeks, certainly soon after the short Whitsun recess, and of course we will debate the Bill at length, as we have done all the way through its passage. As a very honourable gentleman, I am sure he would recognise that this House and the other place have debated the Bill, and all Brexit and non-Brexit legislation, at enormous length.

The Government have clearly been listening—there has been a huge amount of change to those Bills—and we will continue to do so. The withdrawal Bill is now in a much better place than it was. We have listened very carefully to all views on both sides of the Chamber, and we will continue to do so. I urge the hon. Gentleman to accept the fact that this business must be carried out in a carefully considered way, but it will be brought back as soon as possible.

The hon. Gentleman asks for more votes, and I encourage all hon. Members to seek controversy wherever possible—that is what leads to votes. It is a great pleasure for the Government when the Opposition choose to support their legislation, as the Opposition have in many Second Reading debates—it supports the narrative that we are all working together to make this country a better place. Voting is not necessarily, of itself, a good thing. It is when there is controversy, when we disagree, that we need to vote. Voting is not the be-all and end-all in this place, and there is a lot to be said for making progress on important business such as the Tenant Fees Bill, the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill, counter-terrorism legislation and so on, on which we can all agree. That is what people want to see this Parliament doing, and I am proud to say we often do that.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the restoration of the much loved, at least by me, traditional Easter, Whitsun, Summer and Christmas Adjournment debates? If these debates were held in future in Government time, for a full day on the last day before we rise, it would give colleagues the certainty that they would have the opportunity to raise issues of local and national importance.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a much loved attendee of the pre-recess Adjournment debate. His interventions on topics such as phone scams, endometriosis and, of course, the city status of Southend are vital. We must always take every opportunity to welcome all of his interventions about Southend and its long-serving elected representatives, and I am sure the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee will give great consideration to my hon. Friend's representations.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): With reference to the earlier exchanges on Marks & Spencer, and to assuage your undoubted curiosity, Mr Speaker: boxer shorts and socks.

You will have noted from the Order Paper that there are two Select Committee statements this afternoon, and this device is becoming increasingly popular. We have had five applications for Select Committee statements today, but we need to limit them because they do impinge on the debates on important issues to be aired in the afternoon. The Great Exhibition of the North, which Members know I witter on about a lot, will begin four weeks tomorrow, on 22 June. People travelling to Newcastle and Gateshead from other parts of the three northern regions will be depending on TransPennine Express, CrossCountry, trains on the east coast line and Northern to get them there. Let us hope that the Government, with those franchise holders, will make sure that those trains are running much more efficiently than they currently are, in order to get people to and from the Great Exhibition of the North in Newcastle and Gateshead. It is vital to the success of that venture that people can actually get between Newcastle and Gateshead from the three northern regions.

Andrea Leadsom: In response to the hon. Gentleman's mention of Marks & Spencer and boxer shorts, I am tempted to say "knickers", but I am not sure whether you would rule it out of order, Mr Speaker. So, moving swiftly on, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on finding the opportunity again to mention the Great Exhibition of the North and I wish him huge success with it. I absolutely share his desire to see many people attend it and make it a great success.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Mindful of today's urgent question, Members from across the House will be alarmed at the prospect of a merger between giant supermarkets Sainsbury's and Asda. Such a merger would disadvantage their suppliers—the farmers, growers and food firms in my constituency and elsewhere—and consumers, as choice would be reduced. T. S. Eliot said:

"Footfalls echo in the memory".

The footfall in our towns and cities will be a distant memory if these corporate giants are allowed to dominate and snuff out the particularity and variety of independent

traders, so will the Leader of the House ask my dear friend the Business Secretary to come here to tell us what he and the Competition and Markets Authority intend to do to stop this worst kind of virtual monopoly, crony capitalism? There can be a different kind of Britain, but only if the Government and this Parliament fight for it.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is raising a very important point. People have different views on the benefits or otherwise of a merger of this type, but I know we are all keen to see thriving high streets and decent choice, as well as value for money, when it comes to supermarkets. He will be aware that Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions will take place on 12 June, and I suggest that he takes this matter up directly with Ministers then.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I was delighted last year when the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs adopted my private Member's Bill on animal cruelty and announced at his party conference that he would be increasing the maximum sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years. The draft Animal Welfare (Sentencing and Recognition of Sentience) Bill was published in December and the consultation closed in January, but we have had absolutely nothing since. My constituents, who have witnessed some horrific incidents of animal cruelty, and many campaigners all around the country are desperate to know: where on earth is the Bill?

Andrea Leadsom: First, may I congratulate the hon. Lady on her work on this issue? It is vital that we do more to protect animals from cruelty. She will be aware that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has made statements about his intention to introduce a Bill in due course. I cannot give her specific information on that, but the next DEFRA questions is on Thursday 7 June, when she might like to take up the matter with Ministers.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): May we have a debate on wasting police time? There has been a great deal of it about recently.

Andrea Leadsom: I am not sure of the specific context in which my right hon. Friend raises this point, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department certainly made a great point yesterday of appreciating the police for all the amazing work that they do. We all owe them a great debt of gratitude. It was good to see him setting a new tone with the police—one in which we are going to look to work very carefully with them on solving some of the big challenges that we face as a society.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): Recent estimates are that every year in the UK more than 15,000 babies are born damaged by alcohol consumed during pregnancy, condemning them to lifelong difficulties. Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, for example, has been found to affect more than 50% of those in prison; that is just one tragic manifestation of its scourges. Will the Leader of the House press the case with her Government colleagues for comprehensive legislation to address this appalling blight on the lives of so many thousands of our citizens—both to prevent its occurrence and to provide proper care and support for FASD sufferers?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise what is a harrowing situation for so many babies and their parents. Foetal alcohol syndrome is appalling and absolutely shocking, and the fact that it affects so many babies is really terrible. In the first instance, I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can share his views directly with Ministers.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Speeding cyclists on rural roads in the New Forest are putting residents and other pedestrians at risk, simply because they cannot be bothered to fit a bell on their bikes so that they can warn pedestrians of their approach. When I wrote to a Transport Minister about this issue 18 months ago, he replied:

“Through rule 66 of the Highway code we recommend that a bell is fitted to a bicycle and used as necessary. Under current regulations the cyclist is not compelled to keep the bell fitted after the bicycle has been purchased. We have no plans to make bells compulsory as this would be difficult to enforce.”

May we have a statement from the Government about that rather insipid reply, so that my constituents, such as Margaret Verdon JP, can go about their business without fear of being mown down by silent road cyclists?

Andrea Leadsom: I might be tempted to say that this is a bit of a ding-dong, but the issue of cycling and its danger to pedestrians is very real. I have had an appalling case in which the child of constituents of mine was killed by a cyclist who had mounted the pavement. It is a very serious issue and I sincerely encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate; although there is an amusing element, the issue has had severe consequences in some cases.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): As the Leader of the House has advised us that Brexit Bills will come before the House in the coming weeks, I am of the view that that may mean in June, so will she please advise as to where we are on the introduction of proxy voting?

Andrea Leadsom: I believe the hon. Lady is referring to the proposal for proxy voting while on baby leave. I was pleased to see the Procedure Committee report on the sorts of considerations that it felt, having taken evidence, we would need to bear in mind were the House minded to introduce proxy voting. The shadow Leader of the House and I met just this week and discussed this issue. We agreed that we would both seek views, through the usual channels, on how best to proceed. I absolutely assure all right hon. and hon. Members that I mean to make swift progress on the matter.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My constituents and I value our accident and emergency at Cheltenham General Hospital and we want to see 24/7 services restored, but despite my having put in for Adjournment and Westminster Hall debates for many months to ventilate the issue of recruitment pressures, which is sometimes advanced, no debate has been provided. Does my right hon. Friend have any advice on how I might get this important issue before the House?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has been assiduous in raising this issue. He has, in fact, raised it with me on a number of occasions and, indeed, in the House. He will be aware that there have been a number of opportunities

to debate health matters more generally, including in yesterday's Opposition day debate, and there is always the possibility of the next Health questions. Nevertheless, he will need to look to you, Mr Speaker, for an Adjournment debate should he wish to put the issues for his constituents more directly to Ministers.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Has the Leader of the House seen early-day motion 1267 in the name of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)? It marks Dementia Awareness Week.

[That this House supports Dementia Awareness Week which runs from 21 to 28 May 2018; thanks all of the charities which work to support dementia patients and their families and who raise awareness; recognises the hard work and endeavours that they make to bring about a change to the quality of life with their families; and calls on the Government to assist and support research and development to find a cure for those with dementia.]

There is hardly a family in the country that is not touched by this terrible illness. Might we give consideration to having an annual debate on the subject?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important point. He may be aware that this week, in fact, Cabinet Members received training on dementia awareness and how to behave in a more helpful way to those with dementia. He is absolutely right that there are so many people suffering from this awful disease now. As the chief executive of the Alzheimer's Society explained to us, what is very important is to help people to live well with dementia.

I encourage all right hon. and hon. Members to seek dementia-awareness training so that we can all contribute. In response to his specific request for a debate, perhaps the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee might look favourably on something cross-party so that we can all share ideas on this subject.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The shadow Leader of the House was a little bit grumpy this morning, which is very unusual for her. To suggest that I have not been banging on about parliamentary sovereignty is a little unfair. The excellent Leader of the House also bangs on for the House with the Government, and she does that very well. The Opposition have asked for time to debate the amendments to the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. I wholeheartedly support that. Shall we test the sincerity of the Opposition by removing the moment of interruption from the debate, so that we can talk all through the night if we want to?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful, of course, to my hon. Friend for his support for careful debate of all matters pertaining to the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. I assure him that we will indeed be giving plenty of time to this place to be able to debate the amendments when the Bill comes back to this House, which, as I have said, will be in the next few weeks.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Leader of the House confirm whether there will be an opportunity—before the business announced by Faisal Islam on 11 June—for a debate on the increasing risk of no deal, the £900 drop in household incomes to which Mr Mark Carney referred, the difficulty in securing a trade deal with a protectionist United States and the importance of securing a final say on the deal?

Andrea Leadsom: I will not bother with most of the assertions of the right hon. Gentleman, which are simply wrong. The one assertion that I will bother with, because it is very important, is that Faisal Islam does not announce the business of this House. The business of the House has not been announced by anyone at all; it is announced by me on a Thursday.

I have given assurances to the House that I will announce the business and that the withdrawal Bill will come back to this place in the next few weeks. Hon. Members who actually care about the scheduling of complex and competing demands for time in this Chamber will realise that, actually, precise scheduling requires great care and attention and that urgent things do crop up from time to time. Nevertheless, I have given an undertaking: the EU (Withdrawal) Bill will be back in this place within weeks. Nobody has announced anything else to anybody else.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): There have been many comments about Brexit legislation coming back to this place. May I put in a plea from my constituents who have been asking me, “When are we getting on with this legislation?” They are saying that they want it to come before us as soon as possible. I am pleased that the speculation says that it will be next month, because, as 58% of local voters in my constituency voted for Brexit, they want me to get on with voting down those Lords amendments that came from the unelected place.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend; he is right to mention many of our constituents’ desire to see us getting on with putting the EU withdrawal Bill into a position whereby we can leave the European Union with a good, strong, free and fair relationship with our EU friends and neighbours. That is exactly what the Government are focused on, and I absolutely assure him that we are getting on with it.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Can we have a debate about absolutely anything—it does not matter what—as long as we actually have a proper vote at the end of it that tests the Government’s position? The only votes that we are having at the moment are those proposed by the Opposition, and the Government are running scared of those as well. If the Government are too divided or too frit to push through a legislative programme, do they fancy getting off the pot and letting somebody else have a go?

Andrea Leadsom: What a completely extraordinary thing for the hon. Gentleman to say! We had two votes yesterday, and the Government won both. As I explained to the shadow Leader of the House, the Government have put forward a huge number of Bills; 17 have already gone for Royal Assent. If the Opposition choose not to vote on them—or, indeed, if we vote on them and the Government win—these are the normal processes of government. Things are proceeding apace. It is extraordinary for the hon. Gentleman to suggest otherwise.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Please can we have a debate on the positive impact of business on local communities? In addition to the economic benefits, there are social benefits, which I have seen locally given that so many businesses in Harrogate and Knaresborough are putting something back, including

Harrogate Water’s work with the Keep Britain Tidy campaign. I have also seen it nationally, as charities such as Business in the Community work with so many companies. If we have a debate, we can discuss how businesses and communities are much stronger together.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that business can have a hugely positive impact on the local community. I am aware that Harrogate Water is doing exactly that with Keep Britain Tidy. I am particularly pleased to hear about the company’s work in cutting plastic waste, which my hon. Friend knows the Government are determined to tackle. The Government have been supporting the creation of community business through the £1.8 million Bright Ideas Fund, which aims to create a national network of 80 or more enterprising, community-led organisations.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The fourth report of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, published at the end of April 2017, gave the Government until the end of last year to engage with Libya to negotiate compensation for UK victims of IRA bombs that used Gaddafi-supplied Semtex or to initiate a domestic solution. Can we have a statement from the Foreign Office outlining what progress has been made?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will obviously want to raise that matter at the next Foreign Office questions. If he would like me to pursue something that he had the expectation of having already received, he can write to me after business questions and I will take it up with the Foreign Office on his behalf.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Research recently carried out in Wales has found that the introduction of fines for parents who take their children out of school for a family holiday has had no impact whatever on the level of school truancy, yet this policy continues to damage the tourist industry, is unfair on those who work in tourism, and often damages the relationship between families and schools. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement from the Secretary of State for Education reviewing this policy across England and considering whether it is time to drop this policy?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is quite right to raise this matter, which I know he cares deeply about. It is a priority to reduce overall school absence as part of the Government’s ambition to create a world-class education system. In 2013 the Government amended legislation so that a leave of absence could be authorised by maintained schools in exceptional circumstances. I encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate or perhaps a Westminster Hall debate to discuss this issue in more detail, because I am sure that many Members will want to discuss the research that he cited in his question.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): New research by the York Health Economics Consortium has found that scrapping prescription charges for people with Parkinson’s and inflammatory bowel disease will save the NHS more than £20 million a year. Can the Leader of the House please ask Health Ministers to meet representatives of the Prescription Charges Coalition to discuss this important information?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. She will be aware that there are a number of exemptions for prescription charges for different diseases. She may well want to raise this at the next oral Health questions or to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can take it up directly with Ministers.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): On the back of my weekly surgery last Friday, may we have a debate in Government time on the mindset that leads people to fly-tip and litter? I personally cannot get my head around it, and I think that Members in this House and beyond would appreciate an opportunity to debate it, not least because we waste over £1 billion a year on cleaning this up that could be better spent on our public services.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It is absolutely amazing that people who fly-tip seem to care not at all for the impact of their behaviour. Right across the country, in all opinion polls on what people care about, littering and fly-tipping are right up there among the areas that bother them the most. I certainly share his concern about this, and I encourage him to raise it at DEFRA questions on 7 June to see what more can be done about it.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I have been contacted by many constituents who have experienced issues when applying for 30 hours' free childcare, and have experienced problems with this myself. Further, nurseries in my constituency are facing closure due to inadequate funding of the scheme. When can we have a debate about this supposed flagship Government policy, which is clearly not fit for purpose?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely surprised that the hon. Lady raises this as a problem. She will be aware that we are spending about £6 billion every year on childcare support by 2020—a record amount of support—and investing £1 billion a year to deliver 30 hours of free childcare to needy children, with over 290,000 children benefiting from that last term. If she wants to raise this at Education questions, that would be very welcome, but no previous Government have done more than this one to help families deal with the cost of childcare.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Rugby is delivering new houses, with work under way on 16 sites, including in Houlton, where 6,200 new homes will be provided. This is all adding to demand for local health services. While a number of new facilities, including orthopaedic services, have recently opened at our local Hospital of St Cross, the majority of patients have to make a journey to University Hospital Coventry. May we have a debate on how health services can be expanded and developed as a local population increases?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important matter that affects all of us where we have expanding populations in our areas. He will be aware that clinical commissioning groups are responsible for the planning and commissioning of healthcare services for their local area, including the commissioning of hospitals. Where the local population expands over the course of a year, that is factored into the allocation formula so that the

funding is adjusted as a result. The clinical commissioning group should then be providing sufficient services to meet the needs of the local population. If he wants to discuss the specific needs in his area, he should seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise it directly with Health Ministers.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): May we have an important debate on regeneration plans for new towns? We could have something similar to a city deal specifically to address the needs of new towns. Since the closure of development corporations, focus on our new towns has diminished. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on new towns, I feel that regeneration funding is needed for my constituency but also for new towns right across the United Kingdom.

Andrea Leadsom: I am pleased that the hon. Lady has raised this issue. Of course, we are all supportive across this place of the need for new housing for everybody to be able to have a home of their own. That does mean new building, and, in some cases, new towns. It is therefore absolutely right that we provide the right levels of infrastructure and development to meet the needs of those new communities. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise the specifics of the new town proposed in her area.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The debacle over business rates and who has responsibility for them continues. I have been able to establish that both the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Treasury have responsibility, yet neither seems to have responsibility for the review promised in the 2017 Budget. Can we have a debate about business rates and how they are seriously damaging our high streets at the moment?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sympathetic with the hon. Lady. We are all aware of cases in our constituencies of business rates proving extremely difficult for local high street shops, retailers, pubs and so on. It is very challenging. She will be aware that a significant number of measures have been put in place to try to relieve the burden of business rates, but I encourage her to seek a Backbench Business debate so that all Members can share their views and experiences.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Further to the earlier exchanges in Transport questions on disabled access to stations and safety at Lewisham station, I have been contacted by my constituent Caroline Walsh. She is a disabled person who uses a wheelchair, and she wants to invite the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), to join her on the peak-time journey that she will have to undertake once the new franchise comes in and she is forced to change at Lewisham. Can we have a debate in Government time on disabled access to our railway services?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope that the hon. Gentleman took the opportunity to raise that at Transport questions, which preceded this. He raises a significant and important point. We are all used to feeling like sheep when we jump on a commuter train. That can be very difficult for

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

people who have disabilities, and where access is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for them, that is unacceptable. I encourage him to seek a debate, perhaps in Westminster Hall, so that he can raise that issue directly with Ministers, who I know are focused on alleviating the problem, and share his views on what more can be done.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the pupils at Chorlton High School in my constituency on their Incorporated Society of Musicians Trust award for excellent GCSE results? I am regularly contacted by parents who are worried about the narrowing of the school curriculum, and particularly the squeezing out of creative subjects. Can we have a debate in Government time on creativity in the school curriculum?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating the school in his constituency. It is always great to hear and so motivating for young people when a school receives an award for the excellence of its results. We should all celebrate that. He is right to talk about the need to promote creativity. The United Kingdom produces extraordinarily creative industries, and it is important that young people are encouraged to take part and to create their own abilities in this area. He might like to seek an Adjournment debate, so that he can raise directly with Ministers what more can be done.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The Department for Work and Pensions recently announced the closure of its offices in Merthyr Tydfil, which will have a massively serious impact on the town centre economy. That is also happening in other areas of Wales and the UK. Can we have a debate on the Government policy of removing jobs where more jobs are needed, not fewer, so that the Government can understand the implications of their actions for town centres such as the one in my constituency?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that many of the Government's measures to consolidate the delivery of public services are to improve the service by focusing on better advice for people who are claiming benefits, looking for a job and so on. Much of that recasting of physical spaces is to improve the services. Nevertheless, he is right to raise the issue of a potential reduction in jobs. I am aware that the Government seek to redeploy people wherever possible right across the public sector, but he might want to raise the particular case in his constituency at Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions, which are soon after the recess.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Grace Warnock, a young lady in my constituency, is the 897th recipient of the Points of Light award from the Prime Minister. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Grace on her award and facilitate discussions about spreading Grace's sign around the parliamentary estate and Government buildings?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Grace on her Points of Light award. It is a fantastic achievement for her, her family and

people in her community. I agree with him on the importance of promoting that sign. If he writes to me, I can suggest what more we might be able to do in this place.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The East Durham Trust in my constituency is supporting a homeless man who is sleeping rough, forced to live off the land. He has clear physical and mental health issues, and he is clearly malnourished. The local authority cannot house him because he has no benefits, but he cannot claim universal credit because he has no bank account and he cannot get a bank account because he has no address. Will the Leader of the House give us a debate on the housing crisis and how we may tackle homelessness?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear about the hon. Gentleman's constituent. As I have said before in this place, my husband is the vice-chairman of a homeless centre in Northampton that is doing a huge amount to turn around the lives of people who have been or are now homeless. It is absolutely vital that we focus on what more can be done. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government are committed to halving homelessness by 2022 and to eliminating it altogether by 2027. Millions of pounds are being invested both in community projects and in other projects such as No Second Night Out to ensure that we do everything we can to get people off the streets, but also, importantly, to help people who are at risk of becoming homeless.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Last week, I met an incredible group of local women who are supported by Breast Cancer Care. They told me that receiving a diagnosis of secondary breast cancer was devastating, but what added to their devastation, difficulty and struggle was having to fill in a personal independence payment application for the Department for Work and Pensions. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the impact of filling in unnecessary PIP applications for women with secondary breast cancer?

Andrea Leadsom: I know many hon. Members will have constituents, and indeed family members, who are in the same situation. I think we all know of women and men who have suffered from breast cancer. He is right: a diagnosis of secondary breast cancer is devastating for anyone. We know that there were problems with the original work capability assessments, which is why the Government have scrapped unnecessary repeat assessments for people with the most severe health conditions. If the hon. Gentleman has a specific issue in relation to a particular constituent, I urge him to write to Ministers directly on that point.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The EU-Japan economic partnership and strategic partnership agreements are due to be agreed at the European Council at the end of next month—at the end of June. May we have an urgent debate about that on the Floor of the House before the Council, given its huge significance for the UK both while we remain a member of the European Union and after Brexit, not least in relation to data protection requirements?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. She will be aware that the Government intend to carry on all free trade agreements to which we have been a party as a member of the EU once we have left the EU. That is our very clear intention. She will also be aware that legislation is currently under way to give effect to those changes. Nevertheless, she raises a very important point, and I encourage her to seek at least an Adjournment debate, or perhaps a Westminster Hall debate, so that she can raise any particular questions she has directly with Ministers from the Department for Exiting the European Union.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent Stephen Benzie was in hospital for two and a half months, including periods of being in and out of a coma, and the DWP's reaction to that was to stop paying his jobseeker's allowance, rather than giving him a discretionary 13-week extension. He is now on universal credit, but the DWP is refusing to backdate the payments beyond a period of one month. May we have a statement so that the Government can outline whether they think this is a fair system, and can we get an apology for my constituent and a promise to review the backdated period so that he does not lose the money he is entitled to?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the hon. Gentleman's constituent, and I hope that he is now well on the way to recovery. The hon. Gentleman often raises significant constituency issues, and he is absolutely right to do so. I am sure he will appreciate that the Government always need to balance value for the taxpayer and what is fair to the taxpayer with what is fair for the recipient of benefits. He will be aware that when somebody is in hospital, their payments quite often cease for the period during which they are being looked after in hospital, but if he has concerns about this case, I urge him to take it up directly with Ministers.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): With the closure of the Huddersfield employment and support allowance assessment centre, many vulnerable, sick and disabled people from my constituency will face a return journey of more than three hours to the nearest centre, and with the terrible state of the trains at the moment in my constituency, it could be quite a lot longer. It means that Kirklees, home to over half a million people, will be left without its own assessment centre. We have been inundated with calls from people fearful of having to make this journey. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the Government's treatment of some of Kirklees' most vulnerable citizens?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the problems the hon. Lady's constituents are experiencing in Kirklees, which she is absolutely right to raise, and I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can put their case directly to Ministers.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House may be aware of recent reports by the GMB trade union and the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions demonstrating

a clear economic and national security basis for procuring the new Royal Fleet Auxiliary solid support ships within the UK. They determine that there will be a 37% effective discount to the UK through supply chain and wage payments. Will she consider tabling a debate in Government time, with a substantive vote, on this matter, which is of critical national importance, to ensure that we get the best benefit for our national security and economic industrial base?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. He will be aware that the Government have a national shipbuilding strategy focused on giving our Royal Navy the ships it needs while increasing economic growth right across the country and investing in a better-skilled workforce. We are committed, however, to competition, as well as growing jobs right across the country and encouraging innovation. It is always a balance, and I would encourage him to raise his concerns at the next Defence questions.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs says that the so-called "max fac" proposal pushed by a few extreme Brexiteers on the Tory Back Benches will cost our country £20 billion a year. This explosive assessment necessitates a Government statement and parliamentary scrutiny so that we get a Brexit that works for our country.

Andrea Leadsom: We are in a careful and thorough negotiation process that will ensure we get the best possible deal for the UK and our EU friends and neighbours. That means evaluating carefully the alternative options open to us for resolving issues around customs and many other areas. Those discussions and investigations are still under way, and the Government, as we have said right from the start, cannot give a blow-by-blow account of every assessment, which might be top level or very detailed, while we are undergoing these careful assessments. As soon as the Government have a clear position, the House will be made aware of it at the first opportunity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In June 2016, the UN commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea found reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity had been committed by Eritrean officials against their own people since 1991. This came to the attention of the all-party group on Eritrea yesterday. These crimes include the imprisonment and torture of thousands of followers of various religions, including Christianity and Islam. The mandate of the special rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea comes up for renewal at the UN Human Rights Council in June. It is vital that the UK does all it can to support the renewal of this mandate in order to ensure that the crimes of the Eritrean Government do not go unrecorded. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement on this pressing issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman often raises appalling human rights abuses, and is absolutely right to do so, and I hear his grave concerns on this subject. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise his concerns directly with Ministers.

Carillion

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): We now come to the first Select Committee statement. Meg Hillier will speak on her subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and Meg Hillier will respond to those in turn. I call the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

12.9 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As Members will recall, the House agreed on 24 January that the Government's risk assessments of its strategic suppliers should be released to the Public Accounts Committee. I commend my fellow Committee members for their hard work in looking closely at all those papers. Yesterday, we published in full the papers relating to Carillion, which of course subsequently collapsed. We strongly believe that taxpayers, and those who were served by the public services that Carillion was supplying, deserve to know what happened.

The Carillion papers identify clear and compelling problems with the business in the months leading to its collapse. The Carillion assessments—the documents the Government were using—show that although Carillion had been rated as “amber”, owing to its performance against contracts with the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Justice, it was not until after Carillion issued a profit warning in July last year that the Government downgraded it to “red”. It therefore appears that the Government were not aware of Carillion's financial distress until that point. In November last year, officials recommended a provisional “black” rating for Carillion—that information has come directly from the papers that we have published—but following representations from the company, the Cabinet Office did not confirm that designation. Carillion collapsed less than two months later.

The Committee has also considered papers relating to the other 27 strategic suppliers. A strategic supplier is a company that has business worth £100 million or more across central Government and their agencies. The risk assessments relating to other strategic suppliers raise concerns about their performance against contracts, and about the relationship between strategic suppliers and the Government. The Committee has currently chosen not to publish those papers, although I warn the Minister that we reserve the right to do so. We have been clear every step of the way, as we have looked at these papers, that our duty is to be responsible, not reckless. We are mindful of the impact of releasing information that could damage jobs and smaller supply chain businesses, and it is not our intention recklessly to pursue that. However, there might be information that we choose to put in the public domain at a later point.

The Government have become dependent on large contracts to deliver public projects and services, and great secrecy surrounds them. If a company providing a number of those contracts fails, that is bad news for service users and the taxpayer. The Government should

act in the interests of the taxpayer and the public, but the system has become skewed so that too often the Government act to protect the contractor, rather than the service user. The system is broken. There are not enough suppliers bidding for contracts across whole swathes of government, and the system is skewed against smaller, specialist businesses that get work only as part of a longer supply chain. At each stage, margins are squeezed, and too often we see poor service, sharp practice and an unnecessary cost to taxpayers. There remains in government a shortage of the necessary skills to let and manage contracts. Quite simply, the Government are not a clever client, and taxpayers and small businesses are losing out as a result. The Public Accounts Committee has agreed that we will look closely at the nature of the relationship between the Government and their strategic suppliers, the Government's approach to procurement and contractual management, and—of course—the impact on taxpayers and service users every step of the way.

Failure of essential services is not an option, but neither is the prospect of the Government bailing out private companies that fail. Some of the companies are running such large swathes of government that they have become too big to fail. Carillion continued to believe, as it set out in evidence to us in a joint hearing with the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, that it would receive a Government loan to keep it going, right up to the moment of collapse in January.

The Public Accounts Committee has long raised concerns about the lack of transparency in large contracts funded by taxpayers to deliver public services. Our concern, especially given what we have seen in the papers, is that secrecy can lead to a cosy relationship in which the Government are more focused on the interests of the supplier, because of the potential impact of the collapse of that supplier. We can see those problems with other strategic suppliers in the papers we have received, and we will be calling them before the Committee, as well as those in government, to challenge them and to consider how this broken system can be fixed.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her statement and her chairmanship of the Committee—she is doing a superb job. I also congratulate her on the release of the papers today. Does she expect to publish a fuller report by the summer recess?

Meg Hillier: As a Committee, we always set deadlines for the Government when we make recommendations, so I commit to the hon. Gentleman that it is fully our intention to publish a wider report on strategic suppliers by the summer recess. We do not quite know how our inquiry will go, because clearly we are evidence-led, but that is our aim.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I congratulate the Chair of the Committee on another excellent report, and on the forensic and measured way in which she delivered her statement. I hope that the Government take fair notice, although I worry that that may be a forlorn hope.

The Government were given a recommendation by the commercial relationships board that Carillion should be designated “high risk”. The Government ignored

that, although the reason why remains unclear. Can my hon. Friend provide any further evidence of the reason for that rejection? The Government did not disclose that designation at the time of the Carillion scandal. Was that to protect their mates in Carillion rather than the taxpayer? The former chair of Carillion, Philip Green, was a Conservative supporter and Government adviser. Was the Government's relationship with him more important than their responsibility to the taxpayer? We hope that the Government will now act on that responsibility and stop awarding contracts to big suppliers that continually fail to deliver.

The Government are too reliant on a small range of big private contractors. They have done little to widen that charmed circle, even though doing so would increase competition, support small and medium-sized enterprises, reduce costs and, critically, make us less reliant on suppliers in financial straits. Will my hon. Friend now widen her inquiry to look at others that may have been signed off by Ministers, contrary to recommendations of the commercial relationships board?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I obviously welcome the hon. Gentleman to his position, but for future reference, he is supposed to ask a shortish question. Brief questions are ideal, even from Front-Bench speakers.

Meg Hillier: I would say to my hon. Friend that a piece of the jigsaw is missing. The papers released to the Public Accounts Committee only went so far, and the evidence we were given does not indicate when the Government made a decision about what to do with the recommendation in the risk assessment papers. I cannot provide any more evidence for why the Government chose not to implement the "black" rating at that stage, but I assure my hon. Friend that we are widening our inquiry and have access to the other papers. Sadly, and rather depressingly, the Committee has a large back catalogue, and we have highlighted a number of issues to do with contract management in government. We will not leave a stone unturned in our inquiry, and as I said to the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), we hope to publish a report by the summer recess.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I welcome this comprehensive report. When Carillion collapsed, a number of Select Committees scrambled to take evidence, including the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and the Transport Committee. One thing that really struck me was that after the first credit warning, the UK Government continued to grant contracts of £2 billion to Carillion. The Scottish Government started mitigating that, and offsetting the damage right there and then, but after the second and third warnings, there were more contracts. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government adopted the attitude that Carillion was too big to fail? They played fast and loose with taxpayers' money and offered more contracts to paper over the cracks when there was clearly a cash-flow problem in the first place.

Meg Hillier: The hon. Gentleman hits an important nail on the head. The problem with large companies dealing with large contracts is that cash flow can be a problem, and it is tempting for the Government to step in to deal with that. This is a real issue because if a Government contract is failing, it is still difficult for the Government not to award other contracts because of

contract law, and we think that that area needs to be looked into. In any other situation, it would be crazy to give a contract to a supplier that was clearly failing. Given the size of these contracts, few organisations are bidding, and that means that some organisations are running huge swathes of government and have effectively become proxy Departments, even though they are in the private sector, which means that the Public Accounts Committee and other Select Committees do not have the same oversight of them. The National Audit Office can look at a contract, but not at how the company is running. There are real issues here, and we want greater transparency in these contracts. We will be looking closely at the issues raised by the hon. Gentleman in our inquiry.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on an excellent report. Does it not demonstrate a clear systemic failure and an unwillingness to confront bad practice, all of which led to significantly greater long-term cost? Such failure is still continuing in government. More than four months after the collapse of Carillion, work has still not restarted on the Midland Metropolitan Hospital, and I understand there are similar problems at Liverpool. Two thirds of the money for my hospital has already been spent. Security and other costs are rising on a daily basis, and the building will be deteriorating. I have raised this issue endlessly with Ministers, and with the Prime Minister twice in this Chamber, so will the Committee look at the failure of decision making in government and what is, basically, paralysis by process?

Meg Hillier: My right hon. Friend, as ever, raises his point in a very effective way. This is one of our concerns about the size of these contracts. If the collapse of a large supplier means that a hospital in one of our constituencies is not completed, we see that the system is skewed to try to ensure that does not happen, but that means that the interests of the supplier can come first, in that they might end up being bailed out. Carillion was deluded in believing that it would be given a bail-out, and we want to examine why it kept believing, right up to the moment of collapse, that a loan would come.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend and the work of the Committee for the report. When I had the pleasure to serve on the Committee with her, we looked very seriously at apprenticeships. In my constituency, the City of Bristol College stepped in to pick up the apprenticeship programme to ensure that young people in particular were still able to remain in it. Will the Committee bring the two issues together and recognise the important work of other providers to pick up work from the collapse of Carillion?

Meg Hillier: I thank my hon. Friend. That would be outside the remit of our next inquiry, but she highlights an important point. The collapse of a large supplier has a wider impact than simply the contracts it runs, because suppliers are so embedded in the system. The way in which apprenticeships work means that, quite rightly, private businesses are providing apprenticeships, but there is a real risk of a ripple effect when a large supplier collapses. That goes back to the point about how large such suppliers are and how difficult it is for the Government to allow them to fail, which can then skew Government decision making.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on an excellent report. Has she looked at the impact on pensions? I am led to believe that the Pensions Regulator is now demanding that companies pay into the Pension Protection Fund, which in itself is a good thing. That immediate cash injection is having an impact on capital investment. Will she look at the long-term impact of that in relation to the collapse of Carillion?

Meg Hillier: As we have heard, other Committees are looking at other aspects of Carillion. I am delighted that our sister Committees—the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, and the Work and Pensions Committee—are looking at those aspects, and particularly pensions. I will leave other expert Committees to look at that area of work so that we can motor on and ensure we produce a useful report to the House by the summer recess.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I, too, commend my hon. Friend for her important work. The Public Accounts Committee is again proving itself to be very effective. She points out that the system is broken, with sharp practice, a poor service to the public, and a relationship that is too cosy between the Government and their suppliers. How does she think the civil service could improve the reporting of at-risk companies such as Carillion to stop such problems recurring?

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend, who served with distinction on the Public Accounts Committee in the previous Parliament, highlights a really important point. The Committee constantly highlights the need for more transparency in relation to these contracts. This is taxpayers' money funding public services, albeit delivered by private companies. I would hope that the Government share our view that where we shine sunlight, we can also see benefits. Sharp practice comes to the fore if it is hidden away under the guise of commercial confidentiality. When taxpayers are funding something, commercial confidentiality needs to be treated very differently from when private companies are doing business between themselves. Taxpayers' hard-earned money is handed to the Government to deliver a public service, and when companies do not deliver, we need to see that very clearly and the Government should not be afraid to call it out.

Devolution and Democracy

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

12.24 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to present to the House our third report of this Session, entitled “Devolution and democracy in Northern Ireland—dealing with the deficit”. As you will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Northern Ireland Executive collapsed in January 2017, since when there has been no effective ministerial decision-making process at Stormont.

I pay tribute to the Northern Ireland civil service, which has done a fantastic job of trying to hold things together during the impasse. As I will go on to describe in my short statement, it is not good enough to expect the Northern Ireland civil service to continue the work of trying to keep the ship on an even keel. The time has now come for further measures that will enable good governance in Northern Ireland. In the absence of that, I am sorry to say that it is the Committee's view that people in Northern Ireland will notice a difference in their day-to-day lives. It is a demonstration of the importance of Ministers in our way of life and our democracy that such a deficit should have been caused by the collapse of the Executive, and it is very clear to everybody that the lack of ministerial decision making is impacting on people's everyday lives.

We launched our inquiry on 24 November 2017. It was aimed not at being a post-mortem—that is for others to do in the fullness of time and there is no shortage of people wishing to do that—but at looking at where we are now and how we can deal with this impasse in the short term to try to deliver to Northern Ireland the governance it needs and to make the institutions more robust in the future. We have to accept that what we have at the moment is just not working for most people.

It is important to understand at the beginning that while we consulted widely—we are very grateful to everybody who contributed to our consultation—we were not able to take evidence from one of the large parties in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin. That is clearly an omission. It was not the Committee's fault; it was an omission on the part of Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin was asked repeatedly to contribute—it would have added to our report had it done so—but it chose not to. We tried to consult as widely as possible across the community in Northern Ireland, and I think the report has a balanced reflection of opinion in Northern Ireland, as well as a remarkable degree of consensus.

The Committee's principal recommendation is that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland should restart the active facilitation of talks between parties. There is currently a sense of drift in Northern Ireland. There is a frustration on the part of people resident in Northern Ireland that important decisions are just not being made. The solution is very clear: the restoration of the institutions at Stormont using the power-sharing arrangements laid out in the Good Friday agreement. However, we have to face the prospect that that is not going to happen in the immediate future. In those circumstances, it is just not acceptable for us to continue kicking the can down the road and not making crucial ministerial decisions.

In annex 1 of the report, the Committee lists a number of decisions that need to be made right now. It is a long list and it is growing every single day. It is very wide-ranging, touching on practically every facet of life in Northern Ireland, from plans for Kilkeel harbour to the York Street interchange and from the likely delay in implementing a reduction in tourism VAT in Northern Ireland to a failure to build new homes. All of them touch on day-to-day life. Unless we get decisions made by Ministers on these issues, people will start to notice a real difference in the way that they live their lives compared with life in the rest of the United Kingdom. We feel that that is unacceptable.

The High Court ruling of 14 May on the Mallusk incinerator decision was that it was not acceptable for civil servants to make a determination on this planning issue in County Antrim. I think this is the beginning of a process. If the High Court should say that it is not appropriate for civil servants to make such decisions, there is bound to be a catalogue of similar decisions stacking up that will be delayed because we cannot get a ministerial decision without a Minister in place to make such determinations.

The list grows day by day, but help is indeed available to Ministers. In such things as the Hart report, the Bengoa report and the draft programme for government, agreed by the last Executive, we have guidance for making those crucial decisions available to Ministers. If they stick to that script, they will not go too far wrong. However, we need to do more than that. The Committee also recommends taking legal and procedural advice on how to set up committees of Members of the Legislative Assembly to improve scrutiny during the current impasse. It is important that we do what we can, imperfect though it may be, to ensure that democratic voices are heard in Northern Ireland and impact on ministerial decision making.

I will briefly highlight two areas that are in urgent need of ministerial attention. We cannot constitute the Northern Ireland Policing Board because we do not have MLAs capable of populating that board. That is causing real problems. It means, for example, that senior appointments to the Police Service of Northern Ireland cannot be made. We recommend that Ministers take in hand the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 and implement the changes necessary to ensure that the board is able to conduct its statutory functions.

We would like Ministers, in the absence of an Executive, to take action on the Hart report and to introduce legislation, if necessary through this Parliament, to ensure that the victims that Hart identifies are given the redress that they have waited far too long for. We would also like Ministers to explore the role of local government. Councils—they were reduced to 11 in 2015, of course—told us that they are capable of doing more. In the absence of an Executive, that potential has to be explored. We would like Ministers to take note of the pilot that is under way by the Building Change Trust into civic assemblies. We have to ensure the long-term stability of the institutions and make them more robust. In our report, we touch on the sensitive issue of the Good Friday agreement, which contains within it the prospect of a review at some point, and we make recommendations about that, accepting all the sensitivities that surround it.

Everything these days has a Brexit angle, and this one certainly does. We found that the voice of Northern Ireland was not being heard properly in Brussels, when we took evidence from Mr Michel Barnier, and that civil servants struggle to have their voices heard equally with Ministers from Scotland and Wales. That needs to be remedied.

We took evidence widely for the report, and I am grateful to all those who gave willingly of their time to make it the—I hope—thoughtful and constructive piece that it is. I look forward to the Minister's response today and the Government's response in due course. I promise him that we will be tracking progress on a regular basis and my Committee will publish regular updates on progress made against the recommendations that we make in this report, our third of the Session.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): This week marks 20 years since the people of Northern Ireland endorsed the Good Friday agreement. The Committee is right to say that power-sharing devolution is the best structure and that the absence of the Assembly is impacting on daily lives. That is why everyone should be focused on getting devolution back up and running. Will the Chair confirm that as the Good Friday agreement was endorsed by the people of Northern Ireland, any changes to it need to be by the expressed wish of the people and political leaders of Northern Ireland?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He is, of course, absolutely right. We practically say that on every single line of our report, because it is vital that we understand the tenets of the Good Friday agreement. It has a unique status. It was a remarkable achievement and is, of course, held dear in the hearts of those who have benefited from it over the past 20 years. Anything that is done needs to be done with consent, and that runs like a vein through the report that we published this week.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Shailesh Vara): I take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friend and his Committee colleagues for their report. The Government will respond in the usual way. I will make just one point: I hope that he agrees that it is appropriate that we give a huge thank you to David Sterling, the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, to all his permanent secretaries and indeed the entire Northern Ireland civil service for their fantastic work in the past 16 months, in the absence of a devolved Assembly. They deserve our appreciation. That needs to be recognised, and I am sure that my hon. Friend would agree with those sentiments.

Dr Murrison: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend—of course I do—although we have to understand that David Sterling and his civil servants, who have done a remarkable job, should not be put in the invidious position of having to make decisions or feeling that they have to do so because there is no Minister, and then finding that the High Court judges that what they have done is ultra vires. That is unfair, which is one of the reasons why we have recommended that the Secretary of State comes forward before the summer with a framework, at least, within which she will start to make those crucial decisions.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I add to the record our commendation to the Committee Chairman for doing a splendid piece of work. He has brought together some very difficult issues into a single report that was unanimously agreed by the Committee. It was incredibly difficult work. The Committee endorses several political actions with regard to how committees should function in the current Assembly, even though it has broken down. It endorses the re-establishment of the Policing Board and states that we need ministerial decisions as quickly as possible. Those recommendations, carried unanimously by the Committee, should be implemented immediately. I hope that the Secretary of State and the Minister hear that loudly and allow for normal functions to continue.

I understand that the judgment by Justice Keegan, as mentioned on page 25 of our report, will be referred to the High Court on 25 June. Is the hon. Gentleman confident that we will get a quick, urgent decision from the bench, so that we will know whether direct rule will be implemented speedily or whether we will go back into the state of flux of negotiations?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. The report is strengthened by the fact that it was unanimously passed by our Committee, despite the fact that it was wide-ranging and contained some extremely difficult material. That is a tribute to the Committee, and I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman.

I believe that the Keegan judgment is probably the start of a process and that there will be similar ones in the months ahead. I think that it should serve as a catalyst to Ministers to think about the framework to which I have referred and focus their attention on how they can start to make those crucial decisions to deal with annex 1 in the report, and the list is growing by the day. The hon. Gentleman has a particular interest in the judgment that has been made, but there will be more, I am sure, across Northern Ireland. Although I would not want to comment specifically on this one, I am confident that there will be several similar judgments ahead, and we need a strategy from the Government for dealing with them; it is clear that civil servants cannot make judgments of that sort because in our system those decisions are reserved to Ministers.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his statement and commend his Committee for its report. For me, there are two stand-out recommendations in the report. The first is the need for the Policing Board to be reinstated, and the second is for there to be a Brexit Minister for Northern Ireland, because the Province's voice is not being heard. These two recommendations can be advanced by the Government relatively simply: in the first case, with a legislative change—a lot of Northern Ireland legislation goes through this House pretty quickly—and in the second, with a ministerial appointment. Should not the Government just get on with it?

Dr Murrison: I thank my hon. Friend for the interest that he has taken in this matter, and he is, of course, correct on both fronts. We believe that there is no reason for further delay on the recommendations that we have made. I hope very much that the Minister, when he comes to respond to this in the fullness of time, will accept all the recommendations that we have made, but

particularly those that are absolutely crucial now. Northern Ireland's voice is certainly not being heard in Brussels alongside those of Scotland and Wales, although this is a UK Government responsibility and not a devolved matter.

Policing in Northern Ireland is a crucial and desperately sensitive issue. It is unacceptable that we cannot, for example, appoint senior police officers because of the lack of a Police Board. That, in our opinion, is a matter that simply cannot be delayed any further.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), on the leadership that he showed to all its members, enabling us to reach unanimous conclusions. There were times when we thought that that would not happen, but he managed to ensure that it happened in each case.

The backdrop was, of course, the stop-start, pause, start again extension of the talks process, to which pages 3 and 4 of the report refer. That, perhaps, indicates where we are at present. The Committee again took the opportunity to consider where we would go if the Northern Ireland Assembly did not function. The annex outlines—as did the hon. Gentleman at the end of his speech—the number of works still to be done and on hold.

Some of the Committee's conclusions are very important. If the hybrid system for the Northern Ireland Assembly, which has operated in the past, does not work out, we shall look towards direct rule. What are the Chairman's thoughts about how we can pull Sinn Féin out of its obstinate position? Sometimes, we need to move forward and park the issues on which we disagree.

I have another question, about Brexit. The Committee concluded that the Secretary of State and other Ministers should be more active. How does the hon. Gentleman think it can be ensured that Northern Ireland's voice is clearly heard in the Brexit talks?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): The Chairman of the Committee can pick any one of those three. [*Laughter.*]

Dr Murrison: I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who made an extremely important contribution to the report.

Clearly, without the co-operation of Sinn Féin, the recommendations in the report about the committee structure at Stormont, for example, simply will not work. That is inherent in the power-sharing structure, which forms such a big part of the Good Friday agreement. I urge Sinn Féin, the Democratic Unionist party and all the other parties in Northern Ireland to set aside the issues on which they cannot agree and get on with the issues on which they can agree.

I think that people in Northern Ireland are increasingly frustrated by the silly nonsense and the politicking. Matters that are important to them on a daily basis, such as healthcare, education and infrastructure, are not being dealt with because obstinate politicians are standing on their dignity in respect of certain matters. Although the politicians may hold those matters dear, the rest of the population clearly feel that they are not of a nature that justifies putting on hold the good governance of Northern Ireland.

As for Brexit, the hon. Gentleman knows—because he was involved—that we made a number of recommendations in relation to the representation of Northern Ireland, and I hope that Ministers will take them to heart. We need to ensure that Northern Ireland’s voice is properly heard. Given that the border is front and centre of the success or otherwise of the Brexit process, it is ironic that Northern Ireland’s voice is not being heard in Brussels at this time.

Backbench Business

Ahmadiyya Muslim Community

12.43 pm

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

That this House notes with concern the rising tide of persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, Algeria and other countries around the world; further notes the effect that hate preachers have on radicalising people internationally and in the UK, through the media, social media and otherwise; notes with concern the past activities of hate preacher, Syed Muzaffar Shah Qadri, who radicalised Tanveer Ahmed, who in turn murdered Mr Asad Shah in Glasgow in March 2016; calls on the Government to make representations to the Governments of Pakistan and Algeria on the persecution of Ahmadis; and further calls on the Government to make more stringent the entry clearance procedures to the UK for hate preachers by ensuring that entry clearance hubs and the Home Office have adequate numbers of Urdu speakers to monitor visa applications and online radicalisation.

Let me begin by wishing all Muslims Ramadan Mubarak. Let me also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for today’s debate, and all the Members who are present to take part in it.

On the border of my constituency is one of the largest mosques in western Europe, which can accommodate 10,000 worshippers. It is little wonder, therefore, that my constituency and the wider south-west London region are home to a thriving Ahmadi community, who help to make up a global community numbering millions. Let me explain to those who are watching or listening to the debate, and who may be unclear about this, that an Ahmadi identifies as a Muslim, but does not believe that Mohammed was the final prophet sent to guide mankind. That causes the Ahmadi Muslim community to be widely denounced as “non-Muslim”, and to be persecuted around the world—and, I am sad to say, often persecuted here in the United Kingdom.

To introduce the debate, I shall take Members on a global tour, from Africa to Asia and from Greater London to Glasgow. I shall then focus particularly on the persecution faced by the Ahmadi community in Pakistan, before turning to the shocking overspill of hate into the UK that the House has a duty and a responsibility to address.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As my hon. Friend will know, we also have an Ahmadi community in Manchester. Will she allow me to put on the record a tribute to their work in and for the community in general, and in particular to the offer of refuge and hospitality by their mosque after the Manchester Arena attack last year?

Siobhain McDonagh: Their desire to help the wider community and not only themselves marks Ahmadis in a particular way, in all our communities.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important and timely debate. I should be grateful if Crawley could be added to the tour on which we are to be taken. In 2014, the Noor mosque was opened in the Langley Green neighbourhood. As Members will know, “Noor” is Arabic for “light”, and the Ahmadis certainly bring light to the local

[Henry Smith]

community with their charitable work and community cohesion. I am very grateful for their message of “Love for all, hatred for none”.

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): My hon. Friend has done well in securing the debate. The Ahmadi community in the Scunthorpe area is very small, but its members make a strong contribution to the area, and I want to record my thanks for all the work that they do. The hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) mentioned the message of “Love for all, hatred for none”. They live those words, and it is ironic that they suffer persecution in parts of the world as a result of that creed.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Siobhain McDonagh: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Seema Malhotra: Like my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), I pay tribute to the charitable endeavours of the Ahmadi community, particularly through Humanity First. They raised funds for Humanity First to support those affected by the Nepalese earthquake a few years ago, and this weekend the organisation will host a global telethon to raise funds for charity.

Siobhain McDonagh: Just before I continue my global tour, let me say that while all Members present recognise the efforts of the Ahmadi community in their constituencies, former Members also identify with their work. I am delighted that my friend and colleague Tony Colman, the former Member of Parliament for Putney, is present to listen to the debate.

I will begin our global tour in Algeria, where an estimated 2,000 Ahmadis live in fear. Just six months ago, in December 2017, 50 of them were tried on charges related to their religion, and were given sentences ranging from fines to five years in prison. A total of 280 Ahmadi Muslims across Algeria have been arrested on the grounds of their faith in the last two years alone.

We now head east to Egypt, which is home to approximately 50,000 Ahmadis. It was here, earlier this year, that the Interior Minister, Mr Magdy Mohamed Abdel Ghaffar, issued orders for the arrest of 25 innocent Ahmadi men and women. That, however, was just the latest in a long line of persecutions against the Ahmadi community in Egypt, a notable example being the arrest of the community's publications secretary, Ahmad Alkhateeb, and the confiscation of the publications in his property.

Such horrifying persecution can also be found further south, in Burundi. Earlier this year 13 young Ahmadis were arrested in the city of Bujumbura, where they were attending a religious education class. The secret service raided the mosque and arrested the children on charges of alleged terrorism, for in the eyes of the persecutors Ahmadi material is seen in such an extremist light.

Finally, we head to Asia, and specifically to Indonesia. For it is here that the Ahmadi community has existed since 1925, claiming a community of approximately half

a million people. It is difficult, however, to know the community's true scale given that revealing oneself as an Ahmadi here can be nothing less than a magnet for persecution.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a forceful argument. I also concur with other colleagues about the contribution of the Ahmadiyya community and wish to mention in that context mine in Slough.

On Indonesia, just five days ago, on 20 May, *The Jakarta Post* reported that an unidentified mob attacked and destroyed several homes belonging to Ahmadis and attempted to expel the Ahmadiyya community from Grepek Tanak Eat hamlet in Greneng village. Eye witnesses claim that at least one house was destroyed, in the presence of police officers. Does my hon. Friend agree that while the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community is well documented, more needs to be done to raise awareness of the persecution of the Ahmadis in countries such as Indonesia, as well as Bulgaria and Thailand?

Siobhain McDonagh: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

In Indonesia, Ahmadiyya is not an authorised religion. So when an Ahmadi tries to secure identity documents requiring an authorised religion to be shown, they simply cannot get them. Furthermore, Ahmadi mosques have been burned down, Ahmadis have been denied their voting rights, and they have been driven out of their homes, as my hon. Friend said.

I am afraid to say that in Indonesia the persecution comes from the very top. In 2008 a joint ministerial decree introduced by the Minister of Religious Affairs, the Attorney General and the Minister of Home Affairs prohibited the promulgation of Ahmadiyya teachings. The Minister of Religious Affairs followed this up with calls for an outright ban against the Ahmadis in 2011. But perhaps the persecution is best illustrated by the calls from the governor of West Java, who claimed there would be no violence against the Ahmadiyya community if there were no Ahmadi teachings or practices. The “problem”, he suggests,

“will disappear if the belief disappears.”

It is no wonder therefore that just last weekend 23 Ahmadis sought refuge at East Lombok police station, escaping after an angry mob destroyed their homes in an attempt to expel them from the area.

Away from Indonesia, there are currently 10,000 Ahmadi refugees stuck in limbo in countries including Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Thailand, all having fled persecution in their home countries. Sri Lanka even tried to deport 88 Ahmadis back to Pakistan in 2014 despite claims that they could be at risk in their homeland, and so it is to Pakistan that I now turn.

For it is in Pakistan that the world's largest Ahmadi community exists, with an estimated 4 million members, and it is there that the persecution Ahmadis face can perhaps be most prominently found. Only this morning, I awoke to terrifying reports of an attack by extremists on an Ahmadi house and mosque in Sialkot last night, with mob leaders calling for this to happen to all Ahmadi mosques. The situation could not be more precarious, for an Ahmadi in Pakistan faces widespread hatred from the moment they are born to the moment

they die. Perpetrators are given free rein to attack innocent Ahmadis in the knowledge that they will never face prosecution for their actions.

To understand why, we need to revert back 44 years to 1974, when Prime Minister Bhutto amended the Pakistan constitution to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslim for the purposes of law. Ten years later, under General Zia, the Government of Pakistan made it a criminal offence for Ahmadis to call themselves Muslim, refer to their faith as Islam, call their place of worship a “mosque”, make the call for prayers, say the Islamic greeting, or propagate their faith. The constitutional right to freedom of religion that is enshrined in Pakistan’s constitution is therefore completely violated, with an Ahmadi liable to arrest, three years’ imprisonment and an unlimited fine if they are considered to be behaving as a Muslim.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent and moving speech about the pan-global issues faced by the Ahmadiyya community, yet the hate in Pakistan in particular is something many British citizens have faced. It is often why they became British citizens—none more so than my late fellow Glaswegian, Asad Shah, who was tragically murdered in March 2016. He had left Pakistan 20 years before, but sadly the hatred and prejudice followed him on to the streets of our own country. It is important to acknowledge that this is an issue in the midst of our own communities, and we must address it.

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree. Even his holiness the head of the Ahmadiyya faith is now based in London precisely because of the persecution in Pakistan.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that as far as I am aware it is perfectly in order for me or her to say “Salaam aleikum” as a greeting, whereas in Pakistan it is not in order for an Ahmadiyya Muslim to do that?

Siobhain McDonagh: Yes, and that was brought out in the all-party group investigation meeting just on Monday. It had never occurred to me that it was specifically Ahmadis who could not do such things.

Mr Dhesi: The all-party group looked into the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community and we heard some very harrowing tales, as we did from the Christian community, about how they are being persecuted. We must all stand against discrimination in all its guises.

Siobhain McDonagh: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is extraordinary that the persecuted Christian community can do some of the things and act in ways that the Ahmadis themselves cannot, so there is a real conflict going on there.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend is making a powerful and important speech and I pay tribute to her leadership of the all-party group. Many Members present in the Chamber are members of the group and support its work. Does she agree that the persecution in other countries serves in one way to reflect the positive relationship in our country between Muslims from different countries and of different backgrounds, including the Pakistani

community in my constituency, where the relationships between all the different Muslim communities are very strong?

Siobhain McDonagh: I wish all the communities did get on as well as perhaps they do in Hounslow, but there are many incidents of Ahmadis experiencing persecution in the UK from other Muslim groups.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I join other Members in paying tribute to the contribution the Ahmadiyya community makes in business and commerce and also very much in community affairs and public consciousness. But is it not also a problem that some of that hatred comes here from other countries? We have seen attacks on individuals—we have seen incidents in Glasgow and elsewhere, even if they do not lead to murder—as well as calls for boycotts on businesses owned by Ahmadis? Does my hon. Friend agree that the authorities should be cracking down on this and making it clear that it is totally unacceptable in this country?

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree, and local authorities need to look to themselves as well, because Ahmadis are also excluded from most SACREs—standing advisory councils on religious education—in English councils, so some of these things are very close to our respective homes.

The statistics on persecution against Ahmadis in Pakistan show that 260 Ahmadis have been killed and 379 have been assaulted for their faith, while 27 Ahmadi mosques have been demolished and 22 have been set on fire or damaged. Some 39 Ahmadi bodies have been exhumed after burial and 66 Ahmadis have even been denied a burial in a common cemetery—and all in a country with a constitutional right to freedom of religion.

Ahmadi in Pakistan live in constant fear that a baseless accusation will be made against them, with the consequences so often proving life threatening. This persecution is faced from cradle to grave, so I would like to describe the day-to-day reality for an Ahmadi living in Pakistan.

When a young Ahmadi in Pakistan attends school, they face immediate persecution. Take, for example, Farzana, a 15-year-old schoolgirl who gave Christian Solidarity Worldwide an honest and saddening insight. In her own words:

“A few of the children in my school knew that I am Ahmadi and what they did was to go and tell the other students, ‘She is Ahmadi, don’t play with her or eat with her, and stop treating her normally.’”

Her teachers encouraged this—this is what I find so hard to understand—and abused her, both physically and psychologically. Farzana says that they punished her, struck her with sticks and told her not to sit with the other kids because she is an Ahmadi and so is not allowed to do that. Farzana has now moved school as a result of her treatment. She has decided not to tell her new friends that she is an Ahmadi so that she is free from the persecution that she sees as inevitable.

Discrimination in education takes many forms, however, including nationalising all Ahmadi Muslim schools, expelling Ahmadi students based on their faith, and even the editing out of any Ahmadi Muslim’s contribution to Pakistan’s history. Take, for example, Professor Abdus Salam, a groundbreaking scientist famous for his work

[*Siobhain McDonagh*]

in the field of physics, for which he was awarded the first Nobel prize in Pakistan's history. His faith has led to him being erased from the textbooks, which I remind the Chamber are rife with biases against religious minorities—and these are textbooks that we help to fund. There simply must be greater accountability by our Government and the Department for International Development to ensure that the vital educational projects that we fund continue, but without supporting intolerance, prejudice and hatred.

To return to Pakistan, an Ahmadi student may not even make it through education. In 2008, all Ahmadi students were expelled from a medical college in Faisalabad on the basis of their faith, while a local newspaper printed the headline, “We shall not allow admission in Rawalpindi Medical College of any student guilty of blasphemy”. For those young Ahmadis, their education and religion cannot co-exist side by side.

On leaving education, discrimination and persecution continue for Ahmadis in Pakistan when it comes to applying for a job. Even the rumour that someone may be an Ahmadi can destroy their opportunity of employment. For example, the civil and military services have placed restrictions on Ahmadis progressing to senior ranks.

Outside of work and education, the persecution for an Ahmadi in Pakistan is allowed to flourish in wider society. When an Ahmadi applies for a passport, they must state their religion by law. Anyone who self-identifies as a Muslim is required to take an oath declaring Ahmadis as non-Muslim. The reality, therefore, is that no Ahmadi can go to Mecca to perform the Hajj—one of the five sacred pillars of Islam. Nowhere else in the world are Muslims required to make such a declaration. How can a state be allowed to impose a religion on its citizens in that way?

For an Ahmadi in Pakistan, their persecution continues when they come to vote, which is particularly pertinent due to the upcoming elections in the country. An Ahmadi is prohibited by law to vote as a Muslim. They must either sign a declaration that they are not an Ahmadi or acquiesce to their status as non-Muslim, with a violation of that requirement punishable with imprisonment. That has effectively denied them the right to vote for nearly 40 years. What is more, the separate electoral list for Ahmadis is published and publicly available, enabling extremists to target, intimidate and harass the community. It is no wonder they face such persecution.

When legislators proposed reforms within the past year that could have changed the situation, outrage was sparked across Pakistan, prompting senior political and judicial figures to speak out, coupled with a mass violent rally. The reality, therefore, is that time is running out for an Ahmadi to be able to vote in Pakistan this summer.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Is not the key point that Pakistan uses the state, the constitution and the law to persecute the Ahmadis, which is unique? Of all the horrors we know in Pakistan, the Ahmadi Muslims are singled out by the state and the constitution, which is why we should speak out loudly today.

Siobhain McDonagh: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Will the Minister take urgent steps to call on the Government of Pakistan to allow Ahmadis to vote in the upcoming elections without denouncing their faith?

After facing a life of hatred, the end of an Ahmadi's life in Pakistan does not necessarily mean the end of persecution. There are countless examples of Ahmadis being denied the right to burial, with the protesting extremists claiming that they have no right to a burial in a Muslim graveyard. Gravestones have been desecrated and vandalised, and there have also been incidents of exhumation of deceased bodies. To return briefly to the case of Professor Abdus Salam, the Nobel prize-winning scientist, the word “Muslim” has been erased from his gravestone, under a court order.

Electoral disenfranchisement, discrimination in law and expulsion by society have left the Ahmadi community in Pakistan voiceless. So today we must be their voice, for even the constraints of life provide no constraints for the persecution that an Ahmadi in Pakistan may face.

Such persecution, however, is found not just in Pakistan, Algeria, Egypt, Burundi and Indonesia—it can be found right here in the UK, right on our doorstep. Over recent weeks, the all-party parliamentary group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, which I proudly chair, has been running a five-part inquiry into the persecution faced by the Ahmadi community. We have heard the testimony of dozens of Ahmadi men and women, describing the scale of hatred that they have faced. It is truly shocking.

The most stark and shocking example in the UK took place just two years ago in Glasgow, where Ahmadi shopkeeper Asad Shah was brutally murdered.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the important speech she is making. Will she join me in paying tribute to Asad Shah, who was stabbed to death outside his shop in the Shawlands area of Glasgow in 2016? His death shows that we have much to do to raise awareness of and increase support for an important minority group. He was a brilliant man and loved by everyone in his community, recognising that the differences between people are vastly outweighed by our similarities. Asad left us a tremendous gift and we must continue to honour that gift by loving and taking care of each other. We can honour Asad by living in a world of equality as one race—the human race.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I just say that opening speeches usually last 15 minutes? I am sure that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) will take that into account. I acknowledge that there have been lots of interventions. We do have some time, but I am sure she is nearing the end.

Siobhain McDonagh: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is not usually my method to talk for too long, but given the amount of time we have to debate—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): It is the interventions that are doing it.

Siobhain McDonagh: It is, but may I thank everybody for their interventions? I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney). The 40-year-old was stabbed in his store, sparking an outpouring of grief from locals for a man they described as a true gentleman with a heart of gold.

During the police investigation, officers established that the incident was “religiously prejudiced”. The murder was celebrated by some on social media right here in the UK. The Khatm-e-Nubuwwat organisation even posted a congratulations message on its Facebook page. This violent organisation in Pakistan regularly calls for the elimination of Ahmadis, but it has branches in the UK—and is a registered charity, no less. Furthermore, there are reports that Abrar ul-Haq, an extremely vocal supporter of restrictions on Ahmadis in Pakistan, was allowed into the UK just days ago. Will the Minister establish precisely what measures are being taken to ensure that such hate preachers are not allowed entry to this country, so that Asad Shah remains the one and only Ahmadi to be murdered on our shores?

From anti-Ahmadi sermons preached in mosques, to posters calling for a boycott of Ahmadi business and customers, there is a constant undercurrent of hostility against the Ahmadi community. The action taken by Ofcom against a variety of television channels in the UK provides further examples of hate that, if unchecked, will start spreading to other faith groups as well.

One such example was in Waltham Forest in October, when Muslim members of the Waltham Forest communities forum actively stopped an Ahmadi Muslim from being re-elected, stating that he cannot be a representative of Islam. Meanwhile, a former national president of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Students Association describes how “some things have just become routine”

on campuses across the country. Posters advertising events are torn down and there are examples of other Muslim societies, in an overt or covert way, trying to undermine their activities.

We return a final time to the case of Nobel prize winner Professor Abdus Salam. Earlier this month, Oxford University hosted the first UK screening of a film about him, but the university’s Pakistan society has been accused of discrimination due to its reluctance to get involved based on Professor Salam’s Ahmadi faith, forcing an apology after an extremely successful event. Such a scourge of extremism is a stain on the freedom of religion that we rightly and proudly celebrate in the UK.

I want to bring my speech to a close by going right back to the beginning and singing the praises of the Ahmadi community in my constituency. Above the front of the Baitul Futuh mosque in Morden hangs a welcome banner that reads, “Love for all, hatred for none.” The Ahmadi community in south-west London has raised thousands upon thousands of pounds for good causes and I am proud that they are a vital part of the fabric of Mitcham and Morden. As their MP, I have a duty to stand up against the persecution they face. As a Chamber, we have a duty to eradicate such persecution from this country. As a country, we have a duty to put pressure on Governments around the world that allow such persecution to flourish.

1.11 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this hugely important debate. As she set out, she has a significant local Ahmadiyya community. I praise her speech, which was not only comprehensive but shocking in its detail of the persecution suffered by the Ahmadiyya community around the world.

The Ahmadiyya community plays a key role in my local community. Not only was its first mosque built in 1926 in Southfields—the first mosque built anywhere in London—but the area has been a home to the community ever since. The role that the community plays more broadly within the Putney, Roehampton and Southfields constituency that I have the privilege of representing adds hugely to our wider community. It was the Ahmadiyya community that got everybody together after the 7/7 bombings many years ago and made sure that we would not be divided by the hatred that led to those attacks. It is the Ahmadiyya community that has had a peace symposium every single year for 14 years, giving us an annual chance to come together and talk about all the issues that our communities face.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Association does amazing work around the country raising money for charity. When we had the floods several years ago, its members ran towards them. They went to visit and help many of the communities affected, not only in nearby places such as Surrey, but further afield up in Cumbria. Of course, we have also heard of some of the transformational work that Humanity First does around the world. The funds that it uses are raised by the community and put to good use to help others who are far less fortunate.

Only last weekend we had the royal wedding, and one of the street parties that I had the chance to go to was in Arnal Crescent in West Hill. It was organised by local Ahmadiyya residents who saw it as a wonderful opportunity not only to celebrate the wedding, but to try to bring together for the first time people who live in that little bit of my constituency and might not have had the chance to meet one another.

The phrase that we have already heard—love for all, hatred for none—percolates through not only every single thing the community stands for, but how people conduct themselves. That is the case not only locally to me, but throughout this country and around the world. We have heard about the persecution that the community faces, and it is shocking that we have seen some of that right here in the UK. We heard about the terrible murder of the Glasgow shopkeeper Asad Shah—and for what? Apparently for simply wishing his local community a happy Easter, which apparently disrespected the Muslim faith. What an awful attitude to have to a pillar of the community who clearly played their role in bringing people together every day.

I draw the attention of the House to some of the invidious persecution that happens closer to home, including some of the literature that we know gets put out in places such as Tooting, and the fact that some shops are encouraged not to deal with the Ahmadi community, whether by selling goods to them or by employing them. That is totally unacceptable on our doorstep. Whenever I have needed to, I have always raised the issues with our local police, but we certainly should not tolerate persecution right in our backyard.

Mr Dhesi: The persecution of the Ahmadiyya or any community is abhorrent. If we are to be true to the principles of humanity, we must stand shoulder to shoulder with that community and stand up to discrimination in all its guises. Does the right hon. Lady agree that the appointment of a UK global ambassador for religious freedom would assist in highlighting and tackling the issues that we are discussing today, as well as helping to fight discrimination and promote equality?

Justine Greening: It might well help. It is also very helpful that one of our Foreign Office Ministers, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, is himself Ahmadi, so he is intimately familiar with some of the persecution faced by the community.

I draw the House's attention to the excellent report "Ahmadis in Pakistan Face an Existential Threat". It comprehensively sets out the persecution that happens around the world. I thought that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden did an excellent job of setting out just how many countries the persecution happens in. It is absolutely shocking. As she said, only last night a 500-strong mob attacked a mosque that has been there for 100 years in a part of Punjab in Pakistan.

I know that others want to speak, so I will finish my comments by saying that this is a country that has always stood up against persecution and for religious freedom. A debate in this Chamber is hugely important to set out our renewed determination to stand up against such persecution. The fact that this persecution is against a community that is the antithesis of the hatred shown by so many people who carry it out is the ultimate irony, and the approach of the community sets it apart in many positive ways. I am proud to have these people as part of my local community. They have been an intrinsic part of it for a century now, and they will always be hugely welcome. They add to it in a way that is impossible to convey through this short debate. I will play my role as a local MP in standing up against the persecution they face, both here in the UK and internationally.

1.18 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): It is a huge pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening). I apologise for not always notifying her when I go to the mosque in Southfields to meet his Holiness the spiritual leader of the Ahmadi Muslim community and others to talk to them about their issues, although I am sure that she does not really mind. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for her leadership on the all-party parliamentary group, of which I am proud to serve as vice-chair. Our current inquiry is a very important piece of work, and I hope that the House will have a chance later this year to look at it. I pay tribute to her for securing this debate.

I do not want to repeat all the warm and correct words that have been spoken already about the role that the Ahmadi Muslim community plays in our country, except to say that one of the joys in my constituency has been getting to know Ahmadi Muslims, learning about the role they play in Britain and around the world, including of course in Pakistan, and seeing how hard they work. I am always astounded by their discipline and by the amount of time they give to charities, in particular, and to raising money. As others have said,

the amount of money they raise and the things they do to help British communities in distress, such as during the floods, and through Humanity First, which does amazing work for some of the poorest in our world, is an example of people of faith living that faith through their actions.

The persecution that Ahmadi Muslims face, particularly in Pakistan, is quite abhorrent. The way in which the law in Pakistan—from the constitutional provisions to the penal code—allows state persecution is quite shocking and quite unique. By putting that into its laws, the state of Pakistan gives a green light to the people of Pakistan—many of whom I am sure, in many ways, are extremely religious and good people—to commit awful behaviour, which means that people who persecute, attack and even murder Ahmadi Muslims get away with it. They know that they will not be prosecuted or brought to justice, which means the rule of law does not exist for Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, which is atrocious. That is why this country needs to speak loudly and clearly to the Government of Pakistan about how this is absolutely unacceptable.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thought the Foreign Office was quite big on this matter and was talking about it quite a lot to the Government of Pakistan. This debate will help, but the Government are already trying their best.

Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Gentleman is right. This debate is not an attack on the Minister, who has done a good job. The right hon. Member for Putney mentioned Lord Ahmad. As an Ahmadi Muslim, he is able to speak with authority and credibility, and I pay tribute to him.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field)
rose—

Sir Edward Davey: Does the Minister wish to intervene?

Mark Field: I never miss a chance to say a quick word.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for protecting the interests of the Foreign Office. This is a very serious issue, and all hon. Members will appreciate that the correct and most effective way to represent the interests of a persecuted minority is often in private, rather than through megaphone diplomacy. I hope hon. Members will accept that, but I hope to address in my speech some of the valid points that have already been raised in this debate, particularly in relation to the constitution and the penal code, which are tightening the rights of minorities in Pakistan.

Sir Edward Davey: That was a very helpful intervention, because the Minister brings the real issue to bear: our questions on what the Government might do. I understand that such issues need to be dealt with in private, and I am sure that we can take his reassurance that that is happening. I hope that he will focus on the issues of the constitution, and particularly issues of voting and democracy, as the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden mentioned, because it is outrageous that Ahmadi Muslims are prevented from voting in the normal way.

Three Ahmadi Muslims were sentenced to death last year: Mr Mubasher Ahmad, Mr Ghulam Ahmed and Mr Ehsan Ahmed. They are on death row. I know that the Government are clear—not only in Pakistan but elsewhere—about our opposition to capital punishment, but this is even worse because, in a sense, those people are on death row because of their faith and beliefs, which is abhorrent. I hope the Minister can indicate that the rights of such people are being considered.

We need to try to understand, both by talking to the Muslim community here in the UK and by talking to the Pakistani Government, how we can reduce this aggressive extremism, one of the outlets of which we are seeing in Pakistan. We see extremism and its impact in Pakistan and elsewhere through, for example, the Pakistani Taliban. We need to work out how we can reduce that extremism. We have already learned from the inquiry that this persecution is permitted by the state, but it is ubiquitous in Pakistani society, which is what I find most frightening.

Siobhain McDonagh: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the most frightening thing to come out of our inquiry to date is the fact that younger people in Pakistan are more anti-Ahmadi than older people? In the west, we always expect the younger to be more liberal, but that is not currently the case in the Pakistan, and that is very frightening.

Sir Edward Davey: I absolutely agree, which is why I want to push the Minister a little further. Although I accept that sometimes we have to tread quietly on such issues, I am alarmed that the persecution of the Ahmadis is accelerating. Given the murders, the assaults and, as we saw last night, the attacks on mosques, there is a concern that this is becoming endemic and deep-rooted, particularly due to the textbooks that children are reading.

I do not want to go too far along this road, but what is happening to the Ahmadi Muslims will ring awful bells for those of us who have had the privilege to visit Auschwitz with the Holocaust Educational Trust to learn about the eight steps to genocide. Although we should not throw the word “genocide” around too freely, the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect needs to do a study. This may not be something that comes and goes; it might be something that has potentially disastrous outcomes.

There is cross-party understanding about this, and we need to think quite deeply. I am not suggesting that the Government should do this, but I urge them to consider making it clear—perhaps quietly—that we have teeth.

Pakistan enjoys, through the UK and the EU, GSP+ trade advantages—it is one of I think 10 countries that do. When I was a Trade Minister, I campaigned against Sri Lanka getting GSP+ status because countries with that status are supposed to uphold UN and International Labour Organisation agreements and conventions. I do not think that Sri Lanka is in any way doing that in a number of areas, and nor is Pakistan.

If we look at the UN international covenant on civil and political rights, the UN international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights, the UN convention on the rights of the child or the ILO convention concerning discrimination in respect of employment and occupation, it is difficult to see that Pakistan is abiding by the

international conventions it has signed up to with respect to Ahmadi Muslims. These things need to be pointed out because, if we are to have an impact on the behaviour of the Government of Pakistan, we have to show that we are watching and monitoring them, and that we do not accept their behaviour.

There are things that we can do in this country. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden mentioned some of the hatred shown to Ahmadi Muslims, and we need the police and local authorities to understand that, and to be strong in preventing and tackling it where it occurs. There are Ahmadi Muslims in refugee camps around the world who have fled from Pakistan, and we are not taking enough of them into this country. That is a Home Office issue, but I ask the Minister to confirm that he will ask the Home Office whether this country can take in more Ahmadi Muslims who are sitting forgotten in refugee camps. Let us not forget them.

If we are to take anything from this debate, let us make some small steps that are under our control and let us revisit our guidance on how Home Office officials are trained to consider asylum applications by Ahmadi Muslims from Pakistan. Let us make sure there is proper guidance so that people understand what Ahmadi Muslims have to put up with in Pakistan.

As we have heard, there is a united approach on both sides of the House. We want to come together and say to the Government of Pakistan that this is unacceptable. We want to say to Ahmadi Muslims here in the UK and around the world, and particularly in Pakistan, that we stand with them, and that we will campaign for their rights, including their right to religious freedom and basic human rights. We will not rest until that happens.

1.29 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) and the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who is almost an hon. Friend, as we share a border. She referred to the Baitul Futul mosque, which spans our two constituencies. It is where we meet, and as she rightly pointed out, it is the largest mosque in the UK and rumoured to be the second largest in Europe. Like my right hon. Friend and many others in this House, I have been pleased to visit it over many years and to visit the mosque in Putney.

When I was first selected as a candidate, some 18 years ago, the Ahmadiyya community was one of the first to come to see me and to say, “This is what we are doing in the community. How can we work together?” They take part in a number of community events—I wish to stress that at the beginning, before we get on to some of the details. A number of speakers have described this work: the community litter days; and the junior poppy collection day, supporting the people who stood up for freedom in this country and the world when it was required in those dark days some 70 years ago. They recognise the memory of that, and it is symbolic in today’s debate.

The Ahmadiyya community also afforded me the most amusing moment of my first year as a Member of Parliament. Every year, they hold a huge Jalsa Salana for the community all around the world. In those days, it was held in Alton, but it has now moved to a bigger

[Stephen Hammond]

farm in north-west Hampshire. As we drove off, my wife said to me, “You are speaking at this event this afternoon. How many people will be there? Have you prepared something?” I said, “Darling, it is a religious ceremony. If we are lucky, there will be a couple of hundred people there.” Members can imagine my surprise when I stood up to address 30,000 people live and a couple of million more watching on the TV—as they reminded me there. That was a salutary lesson: always try to be prepared before standing up to make a speech, wherever you make it.

Let me get on to the serious points about today. I tried to make an initial serious point about how Ahmadis are integral to my community and to those of so many Members across the House. As we have seen, this community encompass and epitomise their slogan—“Love for all, hatred for none”—and they do so in practical ways. All of us in this House stand up for people’s ability to speak freely and to practise freedom of religion and of political expression. We seek to ensure that people are not allowed to prosecute hate in their speech or actions. In the tour around the world undertaken in the speech of the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden, she not only rightly concentrated on Pakistan, but rightly pointed out, as the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton has just done, that we need to look at a number of issues. If we espouse these values in this House, we should espouse them in the actions taken in our country, too.

One or two people have talked about the worrying development of hate preachers coming to the UK and deliberately infusing hate against the Ahmadiyya community in some of the other mosques. I know from local experience that there was a widespread campaign to boycott Ahmadiyya businesses and shops, which was prosecuted by some of these hate preachers. The hon. Lady was right to mention the TV programme on Waltham Forest, and a Radio 4 documentary “Extremism: Hidden in Plain Sight” revealed recently that certain Urdu newspapers in the UK, which are particularly popular among elements of the Pakistani community, were running deliberate hate campaigns against the Ahmadiyya community. So although I understand this is a debate about persecution in the world, the right hon. Gentleman is right to say that we hope the Minister will say that he will speak to Home Office colleagues to make sure we are doing all we can to ensure that persecution does not happen in this country. If we do that, when we speak to the outside world, we will be able to do so with the surety that we are acting to drive out that extremism and hate in this country.

It would be unwise of me to do a tour of the world as the hon. Lady did, but I should say that this persecution is widespread. My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney and others have made the point that it is the Pakistan state that puts this persecution into law. Other states, such as Egypt and Kazakhstan, allow persecution, but the Pakistan state, by putting this into law, has made this official persecution. In Pakistan, the Ahmadis are not allowed to call themselves Muslim, they cannot refer to their faith as Islam, they cannot call their place of worship a mosque and they cannot preach or propagate their faith. There is deliberate inequality of opportunity in education and in terms of practising whatever profession they may wish to do.

Although I absolutely respect the Minister’s correct position that much can be achieved in private and with methods that are sometimes not public, I believe that it is occasionally important also to use the megaphone, to use his analogy. He will recognise that this persecution is becoming more widespread and more frequent, and several Members have cited examples, but let me put on the record what Christian Solidarity Worldwide has said in the conclusion of its report on the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community. It said:

“The mood of aggression by certain Islamist groups towards the Ahmadiyya community shows no sign of improvement, even the Pakistani government has lacked the political will to make concession to their community.”

It continued:

“The exclusionary politics...has steadily grown since the creation of Pakistan”

and is playing

“an important role”

in other states in the world.

As the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton said, this is an increasing problem, not a decreasing one. The Minister for the Middle East has made the point several times at the Dispatch Box about the number of times we are speaking to the Pakistani Government. Given the increasing nature of this problem and how it is now becoming, as others have said, more or less commonplace and accepted practice in certain countries, I hope that the Minister will say something about what influence the Foreign Office can exert, both publicly and privately.

1.37 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to speak in this important debate. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing it and on the work she is doing through the all-party group. As she said, this debate is taking place during Ramadan, and I pay tribute to all the Muslim communities in my constituency and across the UK who are observing Ramadan. I pay tribute to their generosity, compassion and charity, as well as their contribution to our society and our economy.

Much has been said in this debate about the kinds of shocking discrimination that the Ahmadiyya community are experiencing across the world—not just in Pakistan but in many other countries. They face discrimination in schooling, in their ability to practise their faith and in their ability to participate in work, in livelihoods and in civic life. It is shocking to hear, read and comprehend this discrimination. The Ahmadiyya community are held in high regard in our country and across the world. As other Members have said, their contribution to British national life is seen in their ongoing commitment to the values of loyalty, freedom and peace. It is devastating to be here debating the hatred that is being experienced by the Ahmadiyya community in so many countries, and in the UK from a minority who have imported that hate. It is essential that it is understood, challenged and stopped in its tracks in our country by the police, local authorities and all our interfaith communities and that the local police and Ahmadiyya community throughout the country keep a close relationship.

Last year, along with colleagues from this House and the other place, I attended the 51st annual convention, the Jalsa Salana, which an incredible number of people attended. I was also with colleagues and councillors from Hounslow and throughout the country. I pay tribute to the work in my constituency of Zaheer Khan and Councillor Hanif Khan, their father, Mr Abdul Latif Khan, and their late mother, who helped to build and support the growth of the Ahmadiyya community in Hounslow. The legacy of their work set the tone for how the Ahmadiyya community plays its part in mainstream community life, as seen in the more than 100 Ahmadiyya branches in communities throughout Britain.

I have had the privilege of attending Ahmadiyya community events in Parliament and the peace symposium, from which I have learned a great deal. Such events have brought together leaders from all walks of life to engage in a shared mission for peace, common values and prosperity. The motto “Love for all, hatred for none” is one that reaches out and touches the hearts of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Many of us will have experienced that tone and message of humanity from the Ahmadiyya community. Ahmadis have been quick on the scene and quick to help in moments of need and suffering, such as the attack outside Parliament. Like other Muslim communities and interfaith communities, they brought people together. In the aftermath of that terrorist attack, I stood with them on Westminster bridge, where they brought together young and old, with a message of healing and solidarity.

I am proud of the work of two mosques in my constituency—Baitul Wahid in Hanworth and Baitun Noor in Hounslow West—which unceasingly reach out and bring people together to share in their faith and wisdom. Every year, the community raises hundreds of thousands of pounds for British charities, giving hope to many people who may never know where that support came from.

The Ahmadiyya community continues to suffer persecution around the world. It is important to send the message from the House today that we in Britain are on the side of the Ahmadis and seek their safety in every nation around the world. That requires joined-up action in our country. We have seen the seeds of hatred and discrimination. I do not believe that that is at all representative of the majority in the Muslim community, and it must be dealt with and rooted out. The message must be sent that we will not tolerate that hate being imported from other parts of the world. We must have a joined-up national strategy, involving the police, schools, local authorities, the Home Office and the Foreign Office, because it will take a joined-up strategy to tackle this issue at home as well as abroad.

Will the Minister tell us whether the Foreign Office has raised this issue with the UN? When we see such hatred, which goes against article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, which requires states to guarantee the freedom of religion and belief, it is important that we have a way to stand together as nations to root out this hatred and to make sure that Ahmadis are free to practise their religion and their faith in every country around the world.

1.44 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Salaam aleikum, Mr Deputy Speaker. That means “peace be upon you”. It is seemingly inoffensive and is a very traditional and

heartfelt greeting in all parts of the Islamic world. I can say it here and the Ahmadiyya community can say it here in the UK. When I go to Bangladesh, I say “Salaam aleikum” as a mark of respect to Bangladeshi friends and people I meet for the first time. I could do that in Pakistan, but unfortunately people in the Ahmadiyya community who live there cannot. As we have heard, they cannot have a call to prayer or self-identify as Muslims.

I have spoken a lot in this place about the Rohingya situation. Before that situation exploded last August and people were persecuted and pushed out into Bangladesh, as part of what people have described as ethnic conflict, the first identifiable thing that people raised about the taking away of the Rohingya people’s citizenship was their inability to vote. In Burma, I met the daughter of a former MP. Not only was he no longer an MP but he could no longer even vote in his own country. When that seemingly fundamental and simple right is taken away, there is a real risk of it leading into something so much worse.

We have already heard about the attack by a violent mob on the 100-year-old mosque in Sialkot in Punjab during the night. The house next door was damaged. Local administrators, police and journalists were all at the scene when it was going on, but they were powerless to do anything other than stand by as spectators while people ran around and continued unabashed with the destruction of the Ahmadiyya property. We have also heard about how the violence and lack of any sense that an Ahmadiyya Muslim could even be human, frankly, has come to this country, with the murder of Asad Shah. Someone actually drove from Bradford to confront a Glaswegian shopkeeper and stab him on the doorstep of his own shop—how can that possibly be humane in any sense?

I often mention my right hon. Friend Minister for the Middle East talking about the fact that when people are in effect considered sub-human, there are no depths to which their persecutors will not go to punish, hurt and damage them. I really hope that this is not the thin end of the wedge and that we do not see at some point in future an extension of this persecution—that it does not go so much further, like some of the violence we have seen elsewhere in the world.

The Ahmadi Muslims are fantastic advocates for what is going on around the world. They are a very tight and aware community. The all-party group is doing fantastic work, and I pay testament to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh): not only for her speech and for securing this debate, but for her work and leadership. I am absolutely delighted to serve alongside her on the all-party group, particularly in respect of the important work we are doing to take that testimony.

The most recent report of any great length of which I am aware was done by the International Human Rights Committee, which specialises in Ahmadiyya affairs. The foreword to the report talked about “the systemic nature of their persecution” and “Pakistan’s draconian blasphemy laws”.

The report goes on to quote Prince Charles, who said:

“The scale of religious persecution around the world is not widely appreciated. Nor is it limited to Christians in the troubled regions of the Middle East. A recent report suggests that attacks are increasing on Yazidis, Jews, Ahmadis, Bahá’is and many other minority faiths.”

[Paul Scully]

We must keep having these debates and we must keep these conversations going, because it is so important that we make people aware of what is happening to these people around the world, including in this country.

The key findings of the International Human Rights Committee report include the fact that anti-terror laws are being used—or misused—in Pakistan against the Ahmadis and other religious minorities. We have heard that educational texts provoke intolerance and hatred, particularly the syllabus for religious education, and that nationalised schools and colleges of the Ahmadis have still not been returned to the Ahmadiyya community in accordance with the Pakistan Government's policies.

Effectively, the constitutional amendment of 1974, designating Ahmadis as non-Muslims, laid the foundation for many, many years of hardship and persecution. Such behaviour is now entrenched in Pakistan, so, as the Minister has said, we must use not megaphone diplomacy, but every lever that we have to ensure that this important community around the world, but particularly in their homeland of Rawabi in Pakistan, can feel free to express themselves and worship in the form that they feel appropriate.

We have heard some of the fantastic and wonderful things that the people of the Ahmadiyya community do. I remember going up to Trafalgar Square, just after the Westminster attack: the first people that I saw were from the young Ahmadiyya community. They were holding a big banner saying, “Love for all, hatred for none.” They were there right at the forefront, showing solidarity with us after what they had seen.

I am looking up at the plaque of Jo Cox. When she was murdered, many of us felt at a very low point—I certainly felt at the lowest point in my three years of being in this place. I felt that we were given great succour by the people in the Ahmadiyya community. They came together to pay tribute—metaphorically to put their arm around us to say that these violent, extreme attacks have no place in this country, or anywhere in the world. That is really the basis of the annual peace symposium at the Baitul Futuh mosque. Those peace symposiums are replicated in smaller Ahmadiyya communities as well. The Sutton Ahmadiyya community holds a smaller symposium in my local area; I am always pleased to go and listen to what they say and to share messages of peace with my neighbours.

People from the Ahmadiyya community were among the first to volunteer at Grenfell. They are so aware of what is going on. Going back to the Rohingya situation, the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden mentioned their wonderful work raising money for charity. I went to the telethon at the Baitul Futuh mosque where they raised £140,000 in just four hours for the Rohingya community in Burma. They are driven by such situations.

We have heard a lot today about “Love for all, hatred for none”. Anyone just dipping in and out of this debate on television or in the *Official Report* may think that people are just coming up with a strapline, but it is so much more than that—it really is. That strapline is part of the beating heart of every single member of the Ahmadiyya community. There are no extremists in the Ahmadiyya community; extremism is anathema to their very being. Interestingly, Lord Ahmad, whom we have

heard about today, was one of the first Ministers looking after the counter-extremism policy. That was a perfect choice at the time.

In conclusion, we must make sure that Pakistan does everything that it can to tackle the religious zealots in its country, because we have seen in other countries such as Saudi Arabia how often the Government, the people and the religious leaders work at different speeds. We must make sure that we help them, effectively, to align. They will, of course, fundamentally disagree with the beliefs of the Ahmadiyya Muslims as they believe that Muhammad is the last prophet and the Ahmadis do not. There is no way in which we can reconcile that, but that does not mean that the Ahmadi Muslims should not be able to celebrate their religion and live in peace.

1.54 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow my neighbour, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). We do not see eye to eye on many issues, but in relation to this matter we certainly do. We are both advocates of campaigning against the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community, and, indeed, of religious communities more widely. May I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for bringing this debate to the House, for the excellent work that she does on the inquiry that she is conducting, and for the support that she gives to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community?

Clearly, unfortunately, religious persecution is a worldwide phenomenon; it does not just affect the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. I am sure that many Members here will have been contacted by the Baha'i community, which faces very serious, systematic persecution in Iran—whether in relation to trying to run a business or trying to get education in that country. The fate of Pakistani Christians is also of concern. They suffer persecution not just in Pakistan, but, to some extent, here, with people trying to disrupt some of their services. We know that the Sunni and Shi'a communities in different parts of the middle east are persecuted by the other sect, and that the Yazidis in Iraq have suffered genocide at the hands of Daesh. The Jehovah's Witnesses suffer persecution in Russia and, of course, Jews also face persecution in many parts of the world and, indeed, close to home here and in Europe.

Unfortunately, this issue does not just affect the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, but, obviously, I welcome the fact that the debate this afternoon is focused on them. A number of Members have referred to the motto, “Love for all, hatred for none”, which the Ahmadis live by. As the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said, it is not just a motto or a strapline, or something that they put on a leaflet or website, but something that they follow and observe in their daily lives. They are fully engaged in all aspects of UK life. A number of Members have referred to the different events that they hold, including the peace symposium. I have also attended the Jalsa Salana on a number of occasions. I was surprised not only at the scale of it in the United Kingdom, but at the reach that it has around parts of the world. We even have live coverage from Ghana. They hold a very successful annual fundraising march. I suspect that a number of Members have suggested to the community some charities that it should support, and it has done so very generously.

I am very proud that the Ahmadiyya community is able to practise its faith here without any risk or reservation, and we must ensure that that continues. A number of Members have rightly pointed out that, even in the United Kingdom with the murder of Asad Shah, there have been issues. A leaflet has been circulated by the organisation Khatam-e-Nabuwat, which, frankly, should never have been allowed off the printing press.

I hope that, when the Minister responds, he will be able to say a little about what discussions the Government have had with social media companies—there are issues with Facebook in particular to do with not taking down posts quickly enough. Certainly, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community has presented evidence that, on social media, there are significant issues. Have the Government had a dialogue with Facebook and other social media providers about how and how quickly they tackle these issues?

In the briefing that was supplied, there were some examples of where Ofcom has taken action. The most recent one, certainly on the list that we were provided with, goes back to 2013. I would like some assurances from the Minister that Ofcom is indeed properly resourced so that it can look at every single complaint that comes in. Given the number of channels available, I accept that it is difficult for Ofcom to monitor the range of output, but it is clearly something on which it has to keep a close watch. I hope that it is properly resourced to do so.

There is a worrying domestic picture of which the police, Ofcom, the Government and the social media providers should be aware, as should we as individual Members of Parliament. We should not become complacent about our democracy and the ability of people of different faiths to practise their religion here openly and freely.

I turn briefly to the international aspect of the issue, on which many hon. Members have focused, starting with Algeria. We were fortunate in getting a meeting with the Algerian ambassador some months ago. It was a very cordial and frank meeting; my only concern was that there did not seem to be any recognition that there was actually an issue. I am afraid that, to a great extent, that was the also the impression that we got when we met with the deputy high commissioner from Pakistan. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden may be able to confirm my impression that there did not seem to be an acceptance that there was, in fact, an issue for the community. After reading out some quite detailed evidence, we were asked to provide more evidence to demonstrate that there was a problem. Many Members have referred to the problem that exists in Pakistan, and there needs to be some recognition on the part of the Pakistan high commission here that there is one.

The third country that I should mention, as others have, is Indonesia. Christian Solidarity Worldwide provided us all with some excellent briefings ahead of today's debate. It has suggested some recommendations for the UK Government. I am not sure whether the Minister received the CSW briefing, but I will refer to it for him if he did not. The organisation said that the Government should perhaps be a bit more circumspect when describing Indonesia as a role model of tolerance, because the evidence as far as the Ahmadi Muslim community is concerned, unfortunately, shows that that is not necessarily the case.

Indonesia has the same issue with blasphemy laws as Pakistan. This country should probably recognise that we only abolished our blasphemy laws 10 years ago ourselves—not exactly that long ago. However, we are now in a position whereby we can advocate that other countries should get rid of their blasphemy laws, and Indonesia falls into that category. It passed an anti-Ahmadi Muslim decree in 2008, which I hope that the Government will push to be repealed.

CSW has various concerns, including the need for Indonesia to extend human rights education, including the principle of freedom of religion, and the need to promote inter-faith dialogue and protect and promote the rule of law. It also requests that the Government of Indonesia invite the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to visit the country with unhindered access. Those are some specific recommendations for the Minister. If he has not received this briefing, I will give it to him at the end of the debate, so he will be able to refer to it as well as to what I said on the record.

CSW also flagged up a number of specific recommendations regarding Pakistan, including the repeal of blasphemy laws, and the repeal of section 298 of the Pakistan penal code, which is the provision meaning that Ahmadi Muslims cannot say that they are Muslims, either directly or indirectly. CSW calls for evidence that there are prosecutions taking place of those who attack Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, and for curriculum reform. In fact, a number of hon. Members have mentioned textbooks that teach things that are a direct threat to the Ahmadi Muslim community.

I accept that the UK Government face a bit of a dilemma about whether to invest in education in Pakistan or not. On balance, I think that it is much better that we do. It is better that the UK Government are making that contribution and providing education, rather than relying on religious institutions, which may promote an agenda that is not favourable towards the Ahmadi Muslim community. CSW recommends restoring the Ahmadi Muslim schools. The Ahmadi Muslim community complied with all the requirements for that as long as 12 years ago, but they are still waiting for that to happen. Safeguards are needed—the kind of safeguards that we advocate around the world for human rights defenders—to ensure that no seminary is spreading hate speech or hate material.

CSW also suggests that we encourage Pakistan to move towards a more democratic and pluralistic society. That is obviously quite a wide request for the UK Government, but the list I have mentioned does include some very specific ones. Given that the UK Government have a positive relationship with Pakistan, are a contributor through international development funds and have a security relationship with the country, we are in a position to exert some leverage.

This is a timely debate, in which all Members have reflected on the very significant contribution that the Ahmadi Muslim community make to the United Kingdom. We are all very proud of that, and both sides of this House should do everything we can to defend the rights of the community to practise their religion here and abroad.

2.5 pm

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I apologise for having missed the opening speeches. I indicated to Mr Speaker that that would be necessary, but I am

[Zac Goldsmith]

nevertheless sorry not to have heard the opening remarks from the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). I congratulate her on securing this vital debate. It is also an honour and a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who represents a wonderful seat. I wholeheartedly endorse all his comments.

I have been hugely fortunate during the time in which I have been an MP—and I have to admit, not much before I was elected in 2010—to see at first hand the incredible contribution made to this country by the Ahmadiyya community. We hear all the time, rightly, about the need for better and stronger integration of our diverse communities. That is at the very heart of the values that run right the way through the Ahmadiyya community. It angers me that the community has faced, and continues to face, so much persecution around the world.

The community's motto, "Love for all, hatred for none", which colleagues will remember was plastered across buses in 2011—paid for, in fact, by the Ahmadiyya community—shines out from absolutely everything that the Ahmadiyya community does. Colleagues will also remember, following the appalling attacks just across the road from here last year, the scenes of Muslim women from London's Ahmadiyya community holding hands in solidarity and in condemnation of the violence.

I want briefly to highlight the 10-year partnership between the Royal British Legion and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Association—an extraordinary organisation that has raised more than £200,000 for the poppy appeal. The same organisation runs blood drives, elderly home visits, feeding the homeless, charity events, all kinds of green initiatives, peace conferences, interfaith meetings and so much more. Last year, like other hon. Members, I had the tremendous honour of being invited to the Jalsa Salana—the annual convention of the Ahmadis—which saw around 35,000 people from all over the world coming together to hear the Ahmadiyya message of unity, understanding and mutual respect. I left that event, as I know other hon. Members did, with a bounce in my step. I was inspired by the single-minded commitment of absolutely everyone there to peace, harmony and decency. I feel very lucky that we have such a thriving Ahmadiyya community right here in this great city.

Despite their amazing contribution, wherever they are in the world the Ahmadiyya community is one of the most persecuted groups of people on earth. As hon. Members will be aware, Pakistan—a country with which I have great and deep familial links, and for which I have a great love—is tragically at the heart of much of this persecution. Indeed, we heard only last night that a mob of 500 people is reported to have attacked a 100-year-old mosque in Punjab. We do not yet know the cost of that attack in terms of human suffering.

In that country, there exists deep structural and institutional prejudice against Ahmadis. By defining in law that Ahmadis are not Muslims, Pakistan has justified decades of religious persecution against them, and denied them anything resembling religious freedom. Those who have killed Ahmadis for their faith are often hailed as heroes. Ahmadi figures from Pakistani culture and history are simply deleted from the school curriculum. As

the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned, the use of blasphemy laws against Ahmadis can see them imprisoned or even put to death simply for expressing their beliefs. If anyone is in any doubt, I recommend that they read a copy of a 2016-17 report by the Asian Human Rights Commission, titled "Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan Face an Existential Threat."

This is not just happening in Pakistan. In Algeria, Ahmadis have been detained and forced to worship in secret. In Indonesia—a country with a proud tradition of religious tolerance—Government Ministers have called for a ban on the Ahmadiyya Muslim faith altogether. Most depressingly, anti-Ahmadi persecution exists in the UK as well. Leaflets have been circulated outside mosques and in universities across the country calling even for the murder of Ahmadis. I saw similar in my own constituency a few years ago. Much of it is anonymous, but not always so.

Extremist clerics have called on fellow Muslims to sever all ties with the Ahmadi community. In 2010, the imam of Tooting Islamic Centre demanded a boycott of Ahmadi-owned businesses. An organisation in Pakistan called Khatam-e-Nubuwaat, which has already been mentioned, calls for the elimination of Ahmadis. It has offices here in the UK. That organisation congratulated all Muslims after the murder in 2016 of Ahmadi shopkeeper Asad Shah, who was killed for being Ahmadi. Appallingly, that organisation has been an affiliate of the otherwise respected Muslim Council of Britain. The MCB has since set up a panel to look at the group, but why on earth do we need a panel when the group has quite openly and brazenly celebrated the murder of people whose version of Islam they do not like? Even calling a panel to examine such a phenomenon is an insult. To add to the insult, two of the members that have been put on to it have strong ties to the very group it is investigating. One of them gave a speech shortly before, saying:

"having any sort of ties with them"—

Ahmadis—

"is far worse than being addicted to drugs and alcohol...I am humbly requesting you, do not meet them or your faith would suffer from an incurable cancer... Leave this place with the promise that not only will you sever all ties with the"

Ahmadis

"but also with anyone who sympathizes with them."

Well, I guess that includes all of us in the Chamber today.

So this is not just an international problem, and we need to be much, much tougher on those propagating anti-Ahmadi hatred in the UK. When leaflets are distributed advocating violence or boycotts against the Ahmadis, we all need to speak out as one, more strongly, and law enforcement needs to clamp down on it and pursue those making these threats and incitements in a much more robust manner than we have seen in recent years—as well as, of course, condemning the actions of Governments overseas. The UK must use its considerable historical and cultural ties with Pakistan and other nations to call for an end to inhumane laws that criminalise innocent people simply for expressing their beliefs. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community has faced persecution and hate not with violence but with extraordinary dignity and compassion. They deserve every single bit of support that we can provide, here and abroad.

2.12 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is not often, speaking on a Thursday afternoon, that I realise that I have two hours and 40 minutes to do so. I am only joking, Madam Deputy Speaker—I know that I do not. Everybody else in the Chamber is probably very relieved to hear that as well.

We have a very serious issue before us. I commend the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for her efforts to secure this debate and for her commitment to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. She introduced the debate with compassion, deep interest, and feeling. Every one of us in this House is indebted to her for setting the scene. I thank her very much for that, because we all appreciate it.

In December 2017, I attended an inter-faith event in Omagh in County Tyrone that was organised by the Ahmadiyya community. I was really pleased to be invited, because I had met some of the people there at events over here on the mainland. The organisers of the event invited Muslims, Sikhs, Protestants, Catholics and Jehovah's Witnesses. People of many other faiths and beliefs were also represented, many of them travelling from the Republic of Ireland to share in the positivity of this truly cross-border, cross-community event. I was very impressed by the commitment of the Ahmadiyya community to worshipping in their own way, but also to bringing together people from all walks of life. It was great to have that in Northern Ireland, with probably 120 or 130 people from across the community. I believe that we can all learn a salutary lesson from their inspiring example.

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) mentioned Jalsa Salana. He and I may have very different opinions on Brexit, but on issues of human rights and persecution we agree on almost everything, to the last line and letter. I commend him for all the hard work that he does in this House, as do others. I have spoken at Jalsa Salana events over the past two years. I am very fond of some of the very spicy food that they have there. It is nice to get away and enjoy those things. We cannot fail to be touched by the love and warmth that there is at those occasions. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) said that he came away with a warmth and a goodness in his heart, and I think we would all do the same.

This week I was fortunate enough to participate in another excellent event—the Westminster Hall debate on the persecution of Christians. One thing that stands out to me from that debate, and this one, is that in many countries where Christians are persecuted, Ahmadi Muslims, and indeed many other religious and belief groups, are also persecuted. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, and also chair of the APPG on Pakistani minorities, I have come to understand that to protect freedom of religious belief for any one group means to protect it for all. When I speak, as I do, for the Christian community, I also speak for those of other faiths, and indeed for those of no faith. That is what we should all be doing, and I believe that it is what we all do.

When any one group is persecuted for their beliefs, it is a statement that human rights do not apply to everyone. When such a poisonous thought exists in a society, no

one is safe. Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr. famously said—his words are important words that have been recorded in *Hansard*—

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

He also said:

“No one is free until we are all free.”

We should take those words and think about how important they are. They encapsulate this debate and where we are on these matters. It is vital for people of all faiths and none to follow the example of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and to come together to stand up for the right to freedom of religion or belief for everyone.

In that spirit, I will speak out about the persecution of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Pakistan, and then about practical steps that Her Majesty's Government can take. I am pleased, as always, to see the Minister for Asia and the Pacific, the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field), in his place. I have no doubt that in his response he will encapsulate the feelings, the passion, the beliefs, the words and the thoughts of us all in this Chamber—as indeed will the shadow Minister.

As we have heard, Pakistan is the only country in the world that officially declares Ahmadis to be non-Muslims in law. The Ahmadiyya community is the most widely institutionally and constitutionally persecuted religious group in Pakistan, with Ahmadis facing persistent, systematic violence and structural discrimination that affects their economic, social and employment status, political life, and educational activities. It affects every facet of their lives. In 2017 alone, at least four Ahmadi Muslims were murdered for their beliefs, and since the mid-1980s, 260 other Ahmadis have met a similarly tragic fate. Whenever people go to Jalsa Salana, they will be taken down to one of the exhibitions there and see images of those who have lost their lives because of their faith. I am always very touched by that. It is a poignant occasion that brings home to me, as it would to all of us, just what it means to suffer and to give one's life for one's faith.

The Pakistani penal code is used to prevent Ahmadi Muslims from identifying as Muslims, using Islamic terminology and symbols, preaching, disseminating materials on their faith, or referring to their houses of worship as mosques. Any of the above is punishable by three years imprisonment and a fine. If the offence is regarded as blasphemy, then an Ahmadi could be sentenced to death. How tragic and how wrong that would be. Ahmadis are also technically prohibited from voting because in order to do so, the state requires them to register as non-Muslims, which many refuse to do. Blasphemy laws in Pakistan are disproportionately and unfairly used to target Ahmadi Muslims and other religious or belief minorities. Since 1984, over 300 Ahmadis have been charged with blasphemy under the penal code. While the Pakistani Government may be unwilling to repeal the blasphemy laws, there are many legal and procedural changes that can be made to make sure the law is applied more fairly.

The APPG on freedom of religion or belief, alongside the humanist APPG and the APPG on human rights, recently held a roundtable meeting with Foreign Office Minister Lord Ahmad and the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief in which we discussed some of those changes. For example, the Pakistani

[Jim Shannon]

criminal justice system does not currently carry penalties for false accusations of blasphemy, encouraging allegations based on personal vendettas, enmities, or pure and simple hatred for religious or belief minorities.

Similarly, the current procedure, which we have heard examples of today, of allowing the local police to register blasphemy cases at the behest of any angry individual allows for false or frivolous cases built on the basis of personal animosity. Police stations are easily accessible, and police officers are often happy to register cases without proper investigation. Corruption is unfortunately rampant. If the law were updated to make it an offence to falsely accuse someone of blasphemy and the registration procedure were strengthened to require that any complaint of blasphemy must be submitted to a judicial officer, rather than a local police officer, that could significantly reduce the number of blasphemy charges laid at the feet of Ahmadi Muslims and other minority groups.

It is important to mention that the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims is not limited to Pakistan. Anti-Ahmadi hate has also surfaced in the United Kingdom, as the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden said. The most extreme example of that was the brutal murder in Glasgow of Ahmadi shopkeeper Asad Shah in 2016, who was killed for his faith. Members have referred to the fact that leaflets calling for members of the Ahmadi Muslim community to be killed have been distributed in universities, mosques and shopping centres in London. A recently broadcast documentary by BBC Radio 4, “Extremism: Hidden in Plain Sight”, revealed that Urdu newspapers in the UK such as *Nawaijang* and the *Daily Ausaf*, popular among some of the British Pakistani community, were running hate campaigns against the Ahmadi Muslim community. That speaks to the point I made earlier, that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. That is what we need to keep at the forefront of our minds. Persecution of one group naturally spreads like a virus that can travel across the world, without regard for distance or borders, infecting every society it touches. It is therefore vital to tackle this persecution wherever we find it.

I know that I am pushing at an open door when I speak to the Minister—I say that genuinely and sincerely—so I want to suggest some steps that I believe will be helpful in addressing these issues. First, we must develop strategies to advance freedom of religion or belief in countries with severe restrictions on it. I thank the Minister and his Department for their proactive work on that, as I believe that several country desks in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have already produced such strategies. I ask that he continue to encourage other desks to do the same and that he request that the Department for International Development lends its expertise and input to the strategies, as it can support the FCO in many ways. For example, it can promote freedom of religion or belief through its training programmes and its work on developing education systems that do not discriminate against minority groups.

Secondly, we must develop a database that tracks quantitative data on issues relating to religious or belief minorities. That will help to ensure that the Government are better equipped to recognise and understand patterns of religious discrimination and to respond effectively, in

order to reduce hostility and conflict between groups. That is also vital to ensuring that UK aid is effectively used to support marginalised communities.

Thirdly, we must increase Government expertise, either internally or via external experts, on violence and persecution with religious characteristics and how religion interacts with society and conflict. DFID has previously expanded its expertise in areas such as gender and preventing sexual violence in conflict, and it is vital that the same is done for religion and religious conflict if the Government aim to promote stability. Stability is a multidimensional phenomenon, but I say sincerely and gently that the case of the Rohingya in Myanmar shows us how unaddressed Government and social hostilities and persecution of religious groups can explode into violence and create humanitarian crises.

Fourthly, we must introduce mandatory training for FCO and DFID employees working in countries with severe levels of discrimination of religious or belief groups. That training should focus on the relevant religions, patterns of discrimination and conflict, and how religion and religious actors interact with the specific societal and conflict context. While FCO staff currently have access to training at the LSE Faith Centre, that training is not mandatory for staff who work in countries with severe freedom of religion or belief violations, and it does not necessarily address all the areas I have highlighted.

To sum up, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community continues to be persecuted for its beliefs. Wherever there is violence and discrimination against Ahmadis for their faith, we can be almost positive that we will find violence and persecution against many other religious or belief groups. What that teaches me and hopefully all of us is that to protect freedom of religion or belief for any one group means to protect freedom of religion or belief for all. It is therefore vital that people of all faiths and none follow the inspiring example of the Ahmadiyya community and come together to stand up for the right to freedom of religion or belief for everyone.

I believe that there are many practical steps that Her Majesty’s Government and we in this House can take to increase our capacity to do that. The Government can develop strategies to advance freedom of religion or belief in countries with severe freedom of religion or belief restrictions; develop a database that tracks quantitative data on issues relating to religious or belief minorities; increase Government expertise on violence and persecution with religious characteristics; and introduce mandatory training for FCO and DFID employees working in countries with severe levels of discrimination of religious or belief groups. By taking those steps, the Government can dramatically improve their capacity to promote freedom of religion or belief and to guarantee the fundamental rights of Ahmadi Muslims and other groups across the world. I sincerely thank the Minister for his hard work in this area; we are deeply indebted to him. I encourage him to give serious consideration to my recommendations, and I look forward to hearing his remarks.

2.25 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Salaam aleikum, Madam Deputy Speaker. I join others in sending my best wishes to all those around the world observing

Ramadan. As someone who struggles to observe Lent each year, I think that people's commitment to observing Ramadan, which involves even stricter discipline, is something we can all learn from.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing the debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting such a significant length of time for it. Everyone who has spoken has made heartfelt and personal contributions, and there is a clear consensus across the Chamber on the disgraceful nature of the persecution faced by the Ahmadiyya community. I hope that we will hear positive responses from the Minister.

I pay tribute to the various all-party groups that work on this issue, some of which are represented by Members here today, as well as the organisations that have provided us with background briefings, not least the Ahmadi community and Christian Solidarity Worldwide. I will say more about this later, but I want to say at the start that I join the tributes paid to Asad Shah. It is very fitting that that dreadful outrage is specifically referenced in the motion as it is one of the most terrible examples of persecution that we have seen.

The Scottish National party is, of course, utterly opposed to religious persecution. Religious freedom is a fundamental human right, and it should be respected all around the world. We are deeply disappointed that the Pakistani Government continue to condone, and indeed oversee, some of these religiously motivated attacks, and we call on the Foreign Secretary to press the Pakistani Government to take action against such religious persecution. Reform of blasphemy laws, which has been touched on, is vital, as those laws are incompatible with the international covenant on civil and political rights to which Pakistan has committed. As we have heard, it is alarming that there appears to be increasing persecution of the Ahmadi community here in the United Kingdom, especially given the valuable contributions that the community makes to wider society and our constituencies. I want to reflect on those points in the short time available.

At the end of April, Pakistan's Ahmadi community released a report detailing the growing hostilities that it faces, including indiscriminate arrests, impediments blocking people from voting in general elections, and the various other forms of discrimination that we have heard about. That is why it is vital that there is reform of blasphemy laws in Pakistan, and in other countries around the world that continue to keep such laws on the statute book.

In Pakistan, blasphemy against any recognised religion is illegal, with penalties ranging from a fine to death. Anyone can file a blasphemy case claiming that their religious feelings are injured for any reason. That is being applied to the Ahmadi community, whose faith is not recognised as a religion. Blasphemy laws are bad for freedom of speech, and blasphemy laws that actively ban another religion by name are really quite exceptional and a matter of serious concern. We have heard throughout the debate the impact of that—killings, attacks, and exclusion from schools and other aspects of civil society. Sadly, that has gone on for decades, dating back to at least the amendments to the constitution.

I was particularly taken aback by the fact that to apply for a passport, Pakistanis are required to sign a declaration that they consider Mirza Ghulam Ahmad

to be an impostor prophet and his followers to be non-Muslims. That is a quite astonishing thing for any holder of a religious belief to be asked. The theological and religious parallels are not identical, but it seems to be the equivalent of asking me to sign a document saying I do not recognise the authority of the Pope in the Catholic Church, which would just be astonishing.

This is very difficult to comprehend, although, as the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) said, it is not so long since the blasphemy laws were taken away here. There was a form of religious persecution or discrimination in this country for many years, but we have moved beyond that, and we have to continue to hope that we can encourage other countries to do the same. As Members have said, once we start to allow some form of state-sponsored discrimination against any minority, community or faith group, there is a very real risk that this is the thin end of the wedge, and that the experience of persecution begins to be felt by other minority groups or anyone who does not subscribe to the position put forward by the state.

As we have heard from Members on both sides of the House, although some of the worst and most concentrated abuse of Ahmadis is taking place in Pakistan, there is growing persecution around the world. We have heard about particularly stark examples from Indonesia, but we know of others in Bangladesh, Belarus and various other parts of the world. We have seen the same kind of thing: people being targeted for their beliefs, as well as being attacked and murdered. None of that is acceptable, and it must be called out.

I understand that Ahmadis are officially banned from entering Saudi Arabia and performing the Hajj pilgrimage. Again, I encourage Members to consider what the equivalent would be for members of Christian denominations. If they were suddenly told that they could not visit Rome or the holy places in the middle east—Jerusalem, Bethlehem and so on—what kind of a message would that send? We have to think about how that reality is experienced by the people affected.

Sadly, we have seen such persecution on our own doorstep. Several Members from Scotland have spoken about the experience of Asad Shah, as have others who have contributed to the debate. The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) made the point—it is very true—that the root of the attack appears to have been the fact that Mr Shah was wishing his Christian customers, and his customers generally, a happy Easter. As the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) said, he was living out the phrase, “Love for all, hatred for none”, yet that was one of the motivating factors in his murder.

If anything positive is to be taken from that murder, it is the way in which the community has united in support of the Ahmadis in Glasgow against the kind of extremism displayed in that attack. There was an interfaith campaign, “United against Extremism”, with posters spreading a message of tolerance paid for by the various religious communities, and supported by politicians and civil society across the board. The First Minister was one of several politicians among hundreds of people who attended the vigil that was held.

At that vigil, Ahmed Owusu-Konadu, one of the leaders of the Ahmadi community in Glasgow—I know him very well, and I think every Glasgow MP has got to know him over the past few years since we were elected—

[Patrick Grady]

called on all Muslims to condemn the killing of Shah, saying that spreading a message of intolerance was unacceptable. He and others invited the First Minister to a peace symposium in their mosque, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). At that meeting in December 2016, the First Minister said:

“The Peace Symposium demonstrates the commitment of the Ahmadiyya Community to promoting the values of peace, tolerance and understanding and is an important opportunity for us to restate our shared values and our shared aims.”

Following the incident, the Scottish Government launched a review of the suite of laws covering hate crime offences in Scotland to ensure that they remain fit for purpose in the 21st century. In launching the review, the Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs, Annabelle Ewing, said:

“Racism, intolerance and prejudice of all kinds are a constant threat to society, and while Scotland is an open and inclusive nation, we are not immune from that threat.”

That is absolutely correct; we must have a constant vigil.

We have heard from Members on both sides of the Chamber about other incidents of intolerance and bigotry towards the Ahmadi community throughout the United Kingdom. It was worrying to hear what the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) said about the distribution at universities of leaflets calling for attacks on members of the Ahmadi community. We have also heard about the issues at Oxford University this month, and all that is a matter of great concern.

We are deeply disappointed that the Pakistani Government continue to condone and oversee the conduct of religiously motivated attacks. We call on the Foreign Secretary and Foreign Office Ministers to press the Pakistani Government to take action against religious persecution. It was in 2013 that the Foreign Office first listed Pakistan as a country of concern in relation to its human rights record, particularly due to its record on freedom of religion and belief. An update from the Minister on how the Foreign Office is acting and what representations it is continuing to make through diplomatic channels would be very welcome. What discussions are taking place at a global level through the United Nations and other forums on persecution in the middle east and other Muslim-majority countries?

It is important to hear a response from the Minister to various points made by hon. Members. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who is no longer in the Chamber, proposed a global ambassador for religious freedom, and I believe an equivalent has been appointed in the United States. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) raised the issue of support for refugees, which is absolutely vital. We must be welcoming, and we must be willing to offer refuge to people who are fleeing persecution and hostility. It would be helpful to hear about some of the recommendations made by Christian Solidarity Worldwide and others, including the action that could be taken in Indonesia and elsewhere that was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington. It would also be useful to know what steps the Government are taking to monitor and tackle the rising violence in the UK and to promote solidarity with the Ahmadi

community, and what steps they are willing to take to work with the devolved Administrations in promoting such tolerance.

I want to reflect, as other Members have, on the contribution that the community makes to my own constituency. I have had the pleasure of interacting with Glasgow's Ahmadi community since the 2015 election. We paid tribute to former Members earlier, and it is right to pay tribute to the former Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West, Margaret Ferrier. Even since the 2017 election, she has continued to be a champion for the Ahmadi community, standing in solidarity with people, supporting their campaigns and attending their events. She contributed greatly to the all-party group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community when she was in the House and, indeed, to similar debates in the Chamber.

Much as in the other communities that we have heard about, the community in Glasgow has responded incredibly. In spite of and in the face of violence and persecution, people respond, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said, with peace, love and tolerance. They are actively involved in their community, which shows what a positive contribution can be made. They organise an annual fun run in Glasgow—the money often goes to the children's hospital in Glasgow—as well as litter picks, and they make space in their mosque available for wider community events. They hold peace symposiums, many of which I have had the privilege of attending. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, we are always guaranteed a memorable catering experience when we take part in them.

That experience stands in stark and welcome contrast to the violence and persecution that the community is experiencing, sadly, in the UK and around the world. As other Members have said, the phrase “Love for all, hatred for none” is not simply a slogan; it is a way of being, and a philosophy that permeates every aspect of the community's life. It also reflects the golden rule in other religions, such as, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. Governments who seek to persecute minorities ought to reflect on that, especially if they themselves are doing so in the name of a religion, because there is not a single global religion that, in its purest form, condones or accepts the violence and persecution we are seeing.

Tolerance is absolutely key, and we must speak out because, as other Members have said, if we allow blasphemy laws, persecution or intolerance towards one set of minorities, the risk is that other minorities and indeed larger groups may be affected as well, with the risk of increasing persecution of others and growing intolerance of all kinds. That is what we must unite against, and that is what has been shown by today's debate.

2.39 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). We have heard some excellent speeches and interventions in this very important debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), the chair of the all-party group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, for speaking so eloquently on behalf of the community in her constituency and for very skilfully taking us on a global tour and showing us the truly dreadful extent of the persecution suffered by Ahmadi Muslims worldwide.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) highlighted in an intervention the hospitality offered by the Ahmadi Muslim community in Manchester following last year's attack. The hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), among many others, recorded the contribution the Ahmadi Muslims make to our national life and their constituencies. Like many who spoke, they quoted "Love for all, hatred for none". That is something we will all take away with us this afternoon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) talked about the charitable endeavours of the charity Humanity First and again the contribution the Ahmadi Muslims make to our national life. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) talked about the situation in Indonesia and quoted an incident of a mob attacking several homes and attempting to expel Ahmadi Muslims actually in the presence of police officers. The murder of the newsagent in Glasgow, Asad Shah, was highlighted by my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), who both paid tribute to Mr Asad Shah and said we needed to do much to deal with the prejudice here in this country.

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) highlighted the restrictions on Ahmadi Muslims even on using traditional greetings. The right hon. Gentleman also highlighted the problems of online hatred being spread on sites such as Facebook. My right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) talked about the contribution of Ahmadi Muslims in business, commerce and community affairs and asked that the authorities crack down on the discrimination in this country. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) made the important point that Pakistan uses the state and the law to persecute Ahmadi Muslims and highlighted the case of the three Ahmadi Muslims still on death row. The Minister knows that I have written to him about this case.

The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) and the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) talked about the Ahmadi peace symposium held every year and the great work done by the Ahmadi people in bringing communities together. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the chair of the all-party group on religion or belief, highlighted the important point that freedom of religious belief and thought must apply to those of all faiths and none.

The motion notes the rising tide of persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, Algeria and other countries. It also notes the effect that hate preachers have on radicalising people internationally and in the UK and highlights the past activities of hate preacher Syed Muzaffar Shah Qadri, the Pakistani Muslim cleric who has been banned from preaching in Pakistan because his sermons are considered too incendiary. He is held responsible for radicalising Tanveer Ahmed, the murderer of Mr Asad Shah. As several Members have mentioned, Mr Shah was apparently targeted after messages he put out on social media, including an Easter greeting to Christians. That was highlighted by the right hon. Member for Putney and the hon. Member for Glasgow North. The right hon. Lady also brought attention to the excellent report from the International Human Rights

Committee and the Asian Human Rights Committee entitled, "Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan Face an Existential Threat". I would recommend that excellent report to anybody here who has not read it.

The motion also calls on the Government to make representations to the Governments of Pakistan and Algeria on the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims and to make more stringent the entry clearance procedures to the UK for hate preachers by ensuring that entry clearance hubs and the Home Office have adequate numbers of Urdu speakers to monitor visa applications and online radicalisation.

As we have heard, Ahmadi Muslims believe they are Muslims, yet in 1974 the National Assembly of Pakistan declared them to be non-Muslims. This was done by passing the second amendment to the constitution of Pakistan, which declares Ahmadi Muslims to be non-Muslim despite their own belief and thought. Pakistan's blasphemy laws remain a key area of concern. These legal provisions, which criminalise insults against Islam, are often misused to settle personal scores, and Ahmadi Muslims continue to face blasphemy allegations.

Ahmadi Muslims cannot defend themselves against charges of blasphemy without committing blasphemy and placing themselves in acute legal, physical and social jeopardy. Ahmadi Muslims who voice opposition to legislation making their religion a crime are considered traitors. The International Court of Justice has found systemic and widespread fair trial violations related particularly to Ahmadi Muslims accused of blasphemy.

Under Pakistan's election law, Ahmadi Muslims are effectively denied the right to vote and are disenfranchised unless they declare themselves as non-Muslims, which effectively would mean giving up their faith. The Electoral Commission of Pakistan has decided that Ahmadi Muslims can be permitted to vote only under a separate register and by self-identifying as a non-Muslim minority. This requirement to deny their faith to vote has caused their disenfranchisement from politics for more than 30 years, and worse still the separate Ahmadi electoral register is publicly available, making it much easier for extremists to target them.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom identifies Pakistan as a country of particular concern. Its 2017 annual report states:

"Ahmadi Muslims are subject to severe legal restrictions and suffer from officially sanctioned discrimination. The second amendment declares Ahmadi Muslims to be non-Muslims. Penal Code Section 298 makes it criminal for Ahmadi Muslims to refer to themselves as Muslims, preach, propagate or disseminate materials on their faith, or refer to their houses of worship as mosques. They are also prohibited from voting. Ahmadi Muslims frequently face societal discrimination, harassment and physical attacks, sometimes resulting in murder."

I want to mention here the discrimination faced by Ahmadi women, who live in a patriarchal society. As well as facing similar harassment to Ahmadi men, they can become socially isolated and face overt discrimination during routine activities, such as shopping or going to the market. Some shops display signs and banners that say they do not deal with "Qadianis", the pejorative term used to refer to Ahmadi Muslims. The term originates from Qadian, a small town in northern India, which was the birthplace of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement.

Many Ahmadi Muslims leave Pakistan to seek refuge elsewhere and a safe haven where they can freely practise their religion and live a normal and peaceful life. As we have

[Liz McInnes]

heard, many have fled to countries such as Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Thailand where they may end up in refugee camps or prisons and be denied access to health, education and work. Discrimination against Ahmadis is not confined to Pakistan, and my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden took us on a comprehensive global tour.

Human Rights Watch reports that in Algeria, where the Ahmadi minority amounts to around 2,000 people, about 280 people faced criminal trials in 2016 for denigrating tenets of the Islamic faith or taking part in “unauthorised association”. Algeria’s religious affairs Minister, Mohamed Aïssa, has made disparaging remarks about Ahmadis, stating that they are not Muslims and suggesting that the community is part of a wider Israeli conspiracy to destabilise the country.

In Indonesia, Ahmadis were declared “deviant” by that country’s top Islamic body in 2008. Ahmadi leaders have complained of intimidation since 2005 and say that their prayers and activities have been banned in many districts. In February 2011, 20 Ahmadis were attacked on the Java peninsula by about 1,500 radicals. Three members died and five were severely injured.

In Egypt, the Interior Minister has issued orders for the arrest of 25 innocent Ahmadi Muslim men and women. In Burundi, the secret service raided the Ahmadi mosque in Bujumbura, and arrested 13 children and youths who were attending a religious education class. Those children were arrested on alleged charges of terrorism.

Article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights enshrines the right to freedom of thought and religion. In their persecution of Ahmadi Muslims, countries such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Algeria, Egypt, Burundi and others are denying their citizens that universal right. Pakistan’s founder, Ali Jinnah, expressed a clear commitment to defending religious freedom when he said:

“You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed.”

It is time for Pakistan to return to that vision and for the UK and our international partners to work more effectively and consistently to secure the rights of the Ahmadi community across the world. Although I appreciate that the more sensitive details may not be made public, we can and must clearly condemn the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims.

Will the Minister call on the Government of Pakistan to pay particular attention to the findings of the International Court of Justice and ensure that Pakistan’s judicial processes deliver fair trials for Ahmadis and other persecuted groups? Will he call on the Government of Pakistan to order the immediate release of all Ahmadis on death row and those held in prison? Will he urge the Government of Pakistan to repeal its anti-Ahmadi and blasphemy laws, which are the basis of the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims? Finally, will he call on all member states where Ahmadis are living in diaspora to ensure compliance with UN conventions and that the UNHCR completes its due process?

2.52 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this important debate. I pay a heartfelt tribute to her work as chair of the all-party group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, and for all she has done to support the community in the UK and overseas. That gratitude extends to the contributions of other hon. Members, and I shall try to respond to the points raised. I notice that there is a bit of a south-London mafia in the House this afternoon, but I appreciate the good reason why that is the case. I have the misfortune of living just the other side of the river in my constituency, but in a previous life as shadow Minister for London before the 2005 election, I went out and saw the mosque, and was able to meet many leading members of the London Ahmadiyya community.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, only two days ago I addressed the House in another debate about the persecution of Christians. On that occasion, Members from across the House gave horrifying accounts of the suffering of Christians in the middle east and in north and west Africa. Today, we have heard similarly appalling descriptions of the discrimination suffered by Ahmadi Muslims.

This has been a very heartfelt but calm debate. I hope that the world outside, in particular the countries mentioned today that clearly discriminate against Ahmadi populations, do not think that that calm does not underpin a certain amount of anger and our real sense of mission. The plight of the most peaceable of communities should be in all of our hearts. I hope we continue to work consistently and persistently on it.

Hon. Members have focused their concerns on events in Pakistan and Algeria in particular, but lest there is any complacency we must accept, as has been pointed out, that the UK is not immune from the scourge of religious intolerance. I take this opportunity on behalf of the Government to extend my personal condolences to the family of Asad Shah from Glasgow and to members of the Ahmadi Muslim community. When the Prime Minister was Home Secretary, I know that she wrote to representatives of that community to express the Government’s condolences and solidarity. We took the opportunity to meet representatives of the community to hear at first hand about the issues they face in their day-to-day lives.

I understand what the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) says. There is a great worry that in the world at large minorities are becoming increasingly undermined. We need to recognise that and stand up to it. The Government will continue to challenge extremism in our own community. We all know that our country is built on the values of democracy, respect and tolerance, but we were rightly reminded by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) that we had our own blasphemy laws on the statute book. They were perhaps never going to be pursued, but none the less the fact that they were on the statute book until barely a decade ago reflects the significant change in our own society in the decades and centuries gone by.

I know I speak for everyone in the House when I say that we do not believe it is acceptable for any organisation or individual in this country to promote hatred or to

condone violence, particularly on social media. I will come on to that in a moment or two. Where messages are posted in this country that incite hatred and murder, they should be reported to the police. Such activity is criminal and will not be tolerated.

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton made a point about legislation. This is under active review. He will know and appreciate, as we all do, that the balance between freedom of speech and ensuring safety is very delicate. We need to recognise that many global internet service providers are precisely that: global organisations. The internet itself, in a very positive way, is a global resource. We therefore need to ensure that we are able to work with other countries to try to secure global protocols. That will be a major challenge in the decades to come.

As I said on Tuesday, all religious persecution, in whatever form it manifests itself, is abhorrent and deplorable. Governments, religious groups and right-minded people must condemn such incidents wherever they occur and do everything they can to bring them to an end. That is why we will continue to work tirelessly to promote and defend the rights of people of all faiths and none all around the world, so they can practise their faith or belief without fear or discrimination. I tried to explain our approach to defending freedom of religion or belief internationally in some detail on Tuesday, so I will not rehearse the same points today.

I would like to address specific issues raised in the motion, which, if I may say, was extremely comprehensive, about the prosecution of Ahmadi Muslims overseas and on UK policy on counter-extremism. I will be travelling to Indonesia in August and I am very happy to ensure that the very specific points raised by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden are brought up in the context of that visit. I have visited, and will visit in the future, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Thailand. Specific concerns raised here will be brought up. The hon. Lady raised an issue about the Department for International Development and textbooks. I do not believe it is correct to say that we fund biased textbooks, but I will look into that and, if she will forgive me, will write to her in due course.

The hon. Lady also talked about entry clearance and the processes that we focus on, and I know that a number of Members had concerns about that. Ministers of religion and religious workers can come to the UK through one of two routes: either tier 2 as a minister of religion, for longer-term postings, or tier 5 as a religious worker, for temporary positions of up to two years. Those routes cover coming to preach, to carry out pastoral duties, to work as a missionary or to be part of a religious order, and other religious duties. Both visa routes sit under the points-based system and require a certificate of sponsorship from a licensed sponsor.

It is important that we look at context in this debate. In October 2013, in a relatively recent change—as recent as four and a half years ago, although we have to keep the situation under constant review, given the matters raised in this debate—the Government introduced a genuineness test to better identify those who may be trying to abuse either of those routes. The test applies to applications under the points-based system and is part of a wider policy of assessing the credibility of visa applicants.

That is ultimately a Home Office—rather than a Foreign Office—matter, but we will try as far as possible to have as joined-up an approach as we can. However, I am concerned that the system is being played to a certain extent, and that there are people who may be on dark lists in their home countries—as people who would incite religious hatred—but who are able to come to this country through the rules that we have in place and utilise being based in the UK to preach against Ahmadi in particular. We will do all that we can, and the fact that we have had this debate is useful. This is perhaps something that my Home Office colleagues need to work on more closely, but I give my pledge to the hon. Lady, and indeed, to all Members here, that between us and the Home Office, we will try to ensure that these abuses do not continue.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) spoke about a number of issues that I will come on to in my speech. She mentioned having a special envoy on freedom of religion or belief. I think this matter is almost literally sitting on the desk at No. 10 Downing Street at the moment. This is something on which we have work in progress, and I think we would want to emulate the US model to which the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) referred.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) is a very close and long-standing friend, and I fear that it is in fact 19 years, rather than 18, since his selection as a candidate—I only know that because we are such good friends that we had a celebratory dinner with our wives, within a few days of that event. I will speak to the Home Office about issues related to domestic persecution—he is not here at the moment because he had another pressing meeting to go to, but I am sure that he will read *Hansard* avidly.

My hon. Friend touched on the issue of hate preachers, a subject that a number of others mentioned. The official line is that the Government take a robust stance against individuals whose presence in this country might not be conducive to the public good, but I recognise that there is now a much more deep-seated concern among the public that that test—rather a vague test as it is—is not necessarily capturing some people who really should not be in this country. I fear that part of the difficulty with such a test is that if there is a big hue and cry in the media, or on social media, we highlight particular individuals, and I suspect it is probably the case that the Ahmadi community, by its nature, is not organised on social media so is not able to start a big campaign to stop individuals coming into this country. We will need to look at cases on an individual basis—particularly those that are brought to our attention—but like many hon. Members, I am not convinced that we have got this absolutely right. We will need to tighten up and to try to have a more robust test to ensure that those who would do harm, who would wish to incite religious and other division, are not allowed into this country. Again, this is ultimately a Home Office-related matter and it would be wrong of me to be overly prescriptive at this stage.

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton referred to GSP+. He will know that the EU issues reports on this matter. The most recent report was produced in January this year, and made a number of recommendations to Pakistan, among other countries. Along with our European Union partners, we will continue to press Pakistan in this regard.

[Mark Field]

The right hon. Gentleman made some thoughtful comments. I think he recognised that this was not necessarily the place for immediate action. One of the difficulties of putting countries on to a blacklist, or taking them off a blacklist, is that it becomes difficult to move away from inertia and to have a list of priorities. There can be dangers in going down that route. I think it is important for us to work with international partners, whether in the EU or, in the time to come, in the broader international community. However, the right hon. Gentleman has made a fair point, and I will take this opportunity to revisit precisely where we were with GSP+.

When he was a Minister, the right hon. Gentleman rightly spoke up at a time when the Sri Lankan Government were making international commitments, too many of which had not been fully and properly adhered to. He will recognise that there is also a need and desire at all times to bring countries within the international community so that we can try to work together. Trade and commerce constitute one aspect of that. It must not be an overriding aspect, but it has a part to play in bringing countries back into the international community. These are complex issues, and I shall be happy to take them up with the right hon. Gentleman directly. I should be interested to learn more about his own experience in this regard, especially given that—as he is well aware—Sri Lanka is another country for which I have responsibility in the Foreign Office.

We are aware of a number of reports of Ahmadi Muslims being arrested in Algeria. The Government in Algiers have said that the arrests relate to breaches of law applicable to all religions. However, it is also the case that, while the Algerian constitution provides for freedom of religion, it is not always compatible with domestic law. We will continue to raise our concerns with the Government of Algeria, and urge them to rectify the anomaly and to respect the right of freedom of religion or belief. Last October my colleague the human rights Minister, Lord Ahmad—himself an Ahmadi Muslim, and a man of deep faith—discussed the plight of the Ahmadiyya with the Algerian Minister for Religious Affairs, and our ambassador also raised the issue with him at the beginning of this year.

I should point out that we also have grave concerns about the treatment of the Christian Protestant community in Algeria. We know that, for example, a number of churches have been closed. We have raised that at various levels with the Algerian Government, and our embassy keeps in close contact with the Protestant Church there. Our ambassador met representatives of the Church as recently as last month.

Many Members rightly raised the issue of Pakistan. The debate is particularly timely, in that—as has already been pointed out—it has taken place the day after a brutal mob attack on an historic 100-year-old mosque in the Punjab. We strongly condemn the continuing attacks on a peaceful community. The mob attack serves as an unwelcome reminder of the seriousness of the issue, and I tweeted my condemnation of it earlier today.

Let me say a little about our relationship with Pakistan. We have a tremendous high commissioner there, Tom Drew. He and his team do a great deal of challenging

work in relation to counter-terrorism and a huge number of consular issues. The Department for International Development has its biggest single programme there, and efforts are being made to work with British Pakistanis to develop trade connections for the future. It all involves a huge amount of work, but that is not in any way to downgrade the work that we do in standing up for the Ahmadi community. I will take the opportunity to ensure that we raise that issue more extensively. I have been to Pakistan once in my present post, and I shall be going again later in the year.

I feel, to an extent, that we are not doing enough, but I hope the House will recognise that we are not ignoring the plight of people who are deprived of freedom of religious belief. There is a huge agenda, not least given the importance of Pakistan as a neighbour of Afghanistan, its relationship with China, and the sense in which the United Kingdom is a trusted partner at a time of uncertainty in that part of the globe. I accept that we may need to do a little more, and that we may do more publicly. That was raised by a number of Members today. I did not wish to suggest that because we tend to deal with these issues privately and quietly—and we do, very persistently, with all of our counterparts—there is no opportunity to go a little more public on them, and I will do my level best to achieve that.

Jim Shannon: Sometimes in Pakistan and across the world we speak to people at high levels of Government responsibility, but the problem is getting that down to the lower levels from where it branches out. How do we do that, because if we get that done, we can address many of the issues?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman is right. We do get the highest levels of access to political leaders, and Pakistan is now in a pre-election period which is a time of particular vulnerability for many minorities, and we have touched on that. It is entirely unacceptable that the Ahmadi, for example, are electorally disenfranchised. However we also work at state level, and in my visits going out to Mardan, for instance—I will be heading out to Karachi and Lahore in due course—I try to speak to senior state officials. Pakistan is a large country with over 210 million citizens and many of the states are as populous as parts of the United Kingdom.

We have raised, and will continue to raise, with the Pakistan Ministry of Human Rights the issue of the protection of minority religious communities. I have also done so in writing to the Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif, and my ministerial colleague Lord Ahmad raised this issue as recently as February with the Pakistan Minister of Interior.

The Ahmadi community are prevented by the terms of the Pakistan constitution and penal code not just from practising their religion freely, but from being electorally franchised and indeed, dare I say it, from really being full members of the Pakistani community. That is unacceptable; we state that here and now and will continue to state it in our conversations with our Pakistani counterparts.

Followers of other religions, including Christians and Shi'a Muslims, also suffer persecution, and at the UN last November the UK pressed Pakistan to strengthen the protection of minorities. We also urged it to explain the steps being taken to tackle the abuse of blasphemy

and anti-terror laws, which leads to attacks against members of religious minorities. Algeria and Pakistan are not the only countries where this persecution takes place. In Bangladesh, regrettably, the authorities have often failed to protect minority religious groups. *[Interruption.]*

I am being told by the Whips that my time is almost upon me. I have tried to address many of the issues raised in the debate and, if I may, I will say a few brief words about some of the issues raised on our counter-extremism work. Ultimately, that is a Home Office responsibility, but it is also an important aspect that we deal with. The Government remain committed to tackling extremism in all its forms, violent and non-violent, Islamist and extreme far-right and extreme far-left. The threat from extremist influences continues to grow, and we are responding with a joined-up, cross-Government approach.

We have also established a new Commission for Countering Extremism, with Sara Khan as the first lead commissioner. She will provide support and advice to UK civil society, to help it identify and challenge all forms of extremism. While this currently has a domestic focus, it also recognises that extremism needs to be tackled at source, which on many occasions can be traced to what happens overseas. Incidents of religious persecution in Pakistan have a tangible impact on community relations in the UK, and we are working hard to reduce the risk of extremist influences being projected into our own communities.

There is so much more that I would like to say, but I recognise that we need to move on to other business. I have touched on social media and on what needs to happen and on entry clearance, but let me conclude by saying the following. The Foreign Office will continue to promote freedom of religion or belief right across the globe. We also intend to protect our communities here in the UK from the scourge of extremism by working with partners at home and abroad to counter extremist propaganda, by working with global internet service providers and other social media to close down

the space from which some of this terrible divisive material can be disseminated, and by using every other means at our disposal to exclude from this country those who would do us harm.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all Members of the House for what has been a very worthwhile debate today.

3.14 pm

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us the time to debate this issue. I also thank the eight Back-Bench MPs, mainly from south-west London—the best place in the world to live—who made speeches and everyone who made interventions. I appreciate that this is a difficult day as we go into recess, so I am grateful to the shadow Minister my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), the Minister, and the Scottish National party spokesperson the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for being here.

None of us should underestimate the power and importance to the Ahmadi community of a debate of this sort taking place in the British Parliament, on the Floor of this Chamber. It means that they are recognised and heard—and they desperately need to be heard.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes with concern the rising tide of persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, Algeria and other countries around the world; further notes the effect that hate preachers have on radicalising people internationally and in the UK, through the media, social media and otherwise; notes with concern the past activities of hate preacher, Syed Muzaffar Shah Qadri, who radicalised Tanveer Ahmed, who in turn murdered Mr Asad Shah in Glasgow in March 2016; calls on the Government to make representations to the Governments of Pakistan and Algeria on the persecution of Ahmadis; and further calls on the Government to make more stringent the entry clearance procedures to the UK for hate preachers by ensuring that entry clearance hubs and the Home Office have adequate numbers of Urdu speakers to monitor visa applications and online radicalisation.

Northern Rail Timetable Changes

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Jo Churchill.)

3.15 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): It is a pleasure to have secured this debate, but that is in sharp contrast to the distinct lack of pleasure that hundreds of my constituents are experiencing as they try to travel to and from Manchester following this week's introduction of Northern rail's new, chaotic timetable. Northern rail's revision to its timetable is negatively affecting services from Hazel Grove, Woodsmoor and Davenport train stations at the morning peak hour of travel, and there are also problems with the removal of the last evening service from Manchester to Romiley. I want to bring to the Minister's attention the experiences of passengers as a result of the new timetable, and to show how unacceptable the situation is.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): This debate is, of course, about the Northern rail timetable changes that have caused such misery to my hon. Friend's commuters, which I am sorry to hear about, but unfortunately the situation is the same with Southern railway at the other end of the country. I make a plea to the Department for Transport to impress on the franchises the need to sort this out. The timetable change has been worked on for many months, so they really should have been prepared.

Mr Wragg: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. There is surely no north-south divide in this situation.

The fault of the services, as I will explain, can be traced back to significant delays to the Network Rail upgrade works on the electrification of the Manchester to Preston via Bolton route. That has had a knock-on effect on Northern's ability to run its timetable properly. Network Rail is ultimately the Government's responsibility. What are Northern rail, Network Rail and the Department for Transport going to do to urgently solve the problem so that people can get into Manchester in the morning for work, so that pupils can get to school, and so that people can get home again?

The greatest—but by no means only—problem with the new timetable relates to the glaring gap in the morning rush-hour commuter service to Manchester. The service originates in Buxton and picks up passengers from Hazel Grove station, as well as from Woodsmoor and Davenport stations, which are just outside my constituency boundary but still used by a great number of my constituents. The train service is vital for people to get to work.

The new timetable, which came into effect this week, removed the two most popular peak-time trains: the 7.50 am and 8.01 am from Hazel Grove station, which went on to call at Woodsmoor and Davenport. That leaves a glaring hole. The new timetable has three trains in the space of half an hour between 7.9 am to 7.35 am, but then nothing calls at those three stations until just after 8.20 am. As I said, Hazel Grove no longer has the 7.50 am or 8.01 am service, and the 37-minute gap between 7.35 am to 8.12 am is far too long at that time of the morning.

Hazel Grove does fare slightly better, because an East Midlands train does call there, but it does not stop at later stations. Woodsmoor now has a 45-minute gap in service between 7.38 and 8.23, and then there is nothing

until after 9 am. Similarly, Davenport has a 45-minute gap in service between 7.40 and 8.25, and then nothing until after 9 am.

The changes are having a massive effect on people's ability to get into Manchester before 8.30 am. Oddly, from 9 am, the services resume to three an hour—at 10, 20, and 35 minutes past respectively. That is obviously a better service, but it comes too late for people to get into Manchester for work, and the situation is causing massive disruption. Many commuters are faced with the choice of being late for work because of taking a later train, or being forced to take an earlier train only to arrive at their place of work unreasonably early.

The change in the time of the arrival of the train from Buxton from 8.04 to 7.38 causes problems for local schools. For example, many pupils at Stockport Grammar School used the 8.04 service. The new timetable will have a significant effect on parents having to co-ordinate dropping off their children in the morning and arranging suitable childcare.

It is not only the gap in services that is causing the problem. The loss of two train services means that the same numbers of passengers are forced into fewer trains, so when a train does arrive, passengers have to stand in cramped conditions—they do not even have the privilege of a seat. People are in effect paying a premium rate to travel at that time although there are actually more regular services off-peak.

The situation was already bad with the 7.50 and 8.01 services, as they were generally quite overcrowded. One commuter even told me that last week their train had to be met by an ambulance at Piccadilly station because a passenger had passed out due to a combination of the hot weather and cramped conditions.

These changes will have a damaging and hurtful impact on the family and professional life of many of my constituents. Sadly, the view I hear from residents is that they have the impression that Northern, the Department for Transport and Network Rail do not care about passengers. There is extreme anger. The two words that have appeared most often in the dozens of letters and emails I have received on the subject have been "ridiculous" and "unacceptable", and I must agree.

It is not just the weekday morning service that has been impacted, as the Sunday timetable also changed. It sees the last train to Romiley in my constituency from Manchester Piccadilly moved from 22.20 to 21.45, so the service runs 35 minutes earlier. That means people are no longer able to use the service after visiting Manchester on a Sunday evening, particularly if they are going to theatres and concerts as most events finish at 10 pm or later. The 22.20 train was already too early as passengers usually had to leave events so that they could make the last train home. Now there is absolutely no chance of people getting the last train at 21.45. Again, the situation is ridiculous and unacceptable.

I know that the Government are working hard to rebalance the economy and to support northern cities such as Manchester and the conurbation through the northern powerhouse strategy. Getting commuter train timetables right is essential for that. The impact of poorer services—cancelled trains, uneven timetables, less available rolling stock and overcrowding—will spill out from the rail network and on to our roads. The upshot will be that people are forced back into their cars. Money was recently invested at Hazel Grove station

on a new multi-storey car park to encourage train travel, but now the morning service is so poor as to put passengers off. As the Minister knows—I have raised this many times in this House—the A6 corridor from my constituency into Manchester is one of the most heavily congested roads in the country, so a modal shift from rail back to road is not the direction in which we ought to be heading.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): My hon. Friend is spot on in identifying the cause of the challenges faced by Northern rail with the implementation of the new timetable: the delay caused by electrification on the Manchester-Bolton-Preston line, which has had huge consequences. He has articulated the impact on his constituents incredibly clearly, but this is also happening in other parts of the franchise, including across the Pennines on the Leeds-Harrogate-York line. Does he agree that it is critical that Network Rail works with the Northern franchise holder and the Government, and keeps colleagues informed so that we know where we are? Does he agree that it should conclude the work as early as possible while planning appropriately? This is about planning to get more people off the roads and on to the railways.

Mr Wragg: My hon. Friend's assessment is correct. We cannot get into a situation in which the buck is simply passed from one organisation to the other. It is clear that people need their commuter trains, and that is the end of the story as far as I am concerned.

This whole affair is clearly a great disappointment for Northern rail passengers, who need and deserve a proper service. However, I fear it could also detract from otherwise welcome and long-awaited improvements such as electrification, the 1,300 extra train services introduced across the Northern rail network, and the replacement of the uncomfortable, creaking and quite frankly detested Pacer trains, which I am assured is still on track.

Northern rail has been responding to customers by saying there is nothing it can do about the new timetable. It explains that the timetable is not the result of any decision made by Northern rail, but that it is, as my hon. Friend suggested, delays encountered by the Bolton electrification project, which is of course being delivered, albeit rather slowly, by Network Rail, that have had an effect on the timetable bidding process.

When Northern rail bid for the May 2018 timetable back in autumn 2017, it planned to include services in what has now become known as “the gap”, but those services were rejected by Network Rail, which has the ultimate say on the timetable. Such rejections are not uncommon in a timetable negotiation process, and in the normal course of things, the train operator would have negotiated with Network Rail to move services around a little to make sure all the services could fit in.

During the negotiation period, however, Network Rail announced that the electrification programme from Manchester to Preston via Bolton would not be ready in time for the May changes, which brings the delay to the completion of the project to two years. In the short term, the situation has severely affected plans to increase services and capacity across the Northern network.

Northern rail received the notification in January 2018. To be fair, that was incredibly late in the process, given that it normally takes at least six months to build

a new timetable. Northern rail's timetable planners have been working solidly on the new timetable since then, but have not been able to fit services into the gap.

To make matters worse, Northern rail had to build its timetable around those of other operators that had already had their timetables agreed by Network Rail. Just as airlines have to secure runway slots, rail operators have to bid for platform space at stations for their trains. The problem for Hazel Grove, Woodsmoor and Davenport services is congestion at Manchester Piccadilly.

The morning peak into Manchester, as could well be imagined, is incredibly congested, with many other operators bringing people in from right across the country and the wider region. It will be even busier from May, with TransPennine Express services coming into Piccadilly and heading to Yorkshire.

I have no doubt that Northern rail wanted to run services in the gap but, due to how congested things are at Piccadilly, it seems that that is just not possible. Apparently no more services will fit in. If Northern rail had been advised three months earlier of the delays to the Bolton project, there is every chance that it would have been able to maintain the existing peak service and build a better new timetable, if not one as good as it was. Regrettably, Northern rail did not have that chance.

When I met Northern rail's regional director in April to discuss these issues, I said it was unacceptable for passengers to be deprived of morning services, particularly given the substantial gap in the timetable. I made it clear that the proposals will cause considerable inconvenience to all commuters. Following that meeting, the regional director undertook to make representations to Network Rail to see whether a compromise could be found.

There has been one glimmer of success in this whole affair. Residents close to Rose Hill station in Marple contacted me about the hour gap in the outbound evening service between 5.09 pm and 6.10 pm from Manchester Piccadilly, which had arisen because Network Rail had, bizarrely, scheduled a maintenance train to be on the line at the time. However, following my meeting with Northern, it agreed to run a 5.34 pm departure in the new timetable to provide an extra evening service. That is a small bit of good news. I was pleased to be able to work with Friends of Rose Hill Station on this, and I wish to place on the record my thanks for all its hard work.

Northern rail is placing the blame for this sorry situation on Network Rail. As Network Rail comes under the control of the Department for Transport, I am looking to the Government at least to bang heads together and hold these organisations to account.

In conclusion, I would like to ask the Minister a number of questions. How can this terrible service represent value for money for commuters? Does he agree that the time has come for Transport for the North, the regional transport body, to conduct a formal assessment of whether Northern rail is in breach of its performance targets, as set out in its franchise agreements? If that is determined to be the case, what action can Transport for the North take? What are the reasons for the further delay to the biggest infrastructure project necessary for Northern's modernisation—the electrification of the Manchester to Preston route via Bolton—which has caused this mess up of the timetabling process?

[Mr Wragg]

What assurances can he give that this work will not be further delayed? Do passengers really have to wait six months for the next timetable review, or can the Minister promise today to get things moving much more speedily? I am determined to keep working constructively with all concerned to get the urgent improvements to rail services that my constituents deserve, and I very much look forward to hearing the Minister's reply.

3.31 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Thank you for allowing me to speak briefly in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I also thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for letting me do so and congratulate him on securing the debate. I promise to be brief, as I did when securing the opportunity to speak. Let me try to distil how urgently we are calling on the Government to intervene on the issue of Northern rail. The timetable issue is very significant and the hon. Gentleman set it out cogently. It is simply not acceptable that Network Rail's failure to deliver on time is causing such carnage right across the north of England, for his constituents and mine.

Let me briefly set out the situation we have seen this week as a result of the change in the timetables. This May was supposed to be the moment when, after the months of suffering that my constituents have been through because of totally inadequate services from Northern, all of the jam arrived. We were supposed to have new carriages and an improved timetable, and then it would all have been worth while.

Yesterday, however, constituents were getting in touch with me to show the situation at Ulverston station. At school leaving time, 3.15 pm to 3.20 pm, children who now have to leave school early to get on to these services because of the changed timetable—that damages their education—turned up to find a single-carriage train coming from Lancaster. It was already full, but there were an estimated 200 students at Ulverston station, at least 50 of whom were left behind. The following train was cancelled. There is a clear safeguarding issue here.

It is vital the Government take heed of the situation. We have been urging the Minister's colleagues to take this up for months. There are finally signs that they are waking up to the travesty of Northern rail's services, but will the Minister please take back the message that we are experiencing a truly dire situation on the Furness line, up the Cumbria coastline and on the Windermere line in Cumbria, all of which are now operated by Northern? Not only are schoolchildren affected, but passengers are absolutely at their wits' end and local businesses are clearly being damaged by the lack of reliability.

I understand that the Secretary of State said this week that Northern rail's failures were now his No. 1 priority—well, okay, after all this time we will take him at his word, but it is vital that he delivers on this. There are things that can be done, not least because the performance is so bad that it is surely time for the Department formally to investigate whether Northern is meeting its basic customer service obligations. What can be done to unlock this deadlock with Network Rail? How can we get back to the kind of service that people pay top whack for and are simply not getting?

3.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on securing this debate and thank my hon. Friends the Members for Crawley (Henry Smith) and for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) and the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for their contributions. We have been reminded that this is not just about Northern rail, although it is clearly central in this instance, but is an issue that affects other parts of the country, other parts of the north and parts of the south, too.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove has given us an excellent opportunity to discuss the recent timetable changes. The debate is timely because we are still in the lee of the changes, which were launched less than a week ago and which constitute—we are reliably informed—the biggest change to network timetables in at least a generation. My hon. Friend has proved himself a vigorous and effective campaigner in many different areas, and this debate underlines that: it is the last debate before the recess, yet my hon. Friend is here fighting the case for his constituents. I salute him for that. He is doing so even though this issue was raised in the exchanges on yesterday's urgent question and again in oral questions this morning. There has rightly been a consolidated set of interrogations of the Government, and it is now on the record from every conceivable angle. I appreciate that.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I join the Minister in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg). As someone who occasionally travels up to the north, I hope that it might be possible for the Minister, with the help of the rail industry, to put out a general statement over the weekend about how the changes are settling in. If the changes are having some adverse effects not only in the north, as my hon. Friend set out well, but in the south, as was illustrated by my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), our passengers should be able to know what they can expect from next week on and whether, if there are glitches, they will be cured within six months, rather than everyone having to wait until the next major change.

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend neatly segues me on to my next topic. His point is well landed and well taken account of, and it will undoubtedly feed back to colleagues and officials, but as he will be aware, it does not require a PhD in cryptology or the detective skills of a Sherlock Holmes to realise that I am the Roads Minister and therefore will not be giving direct instructions to officials in this regard. Nevertheless, I shall ensure that due regard is taken of the point that he raises, and rightly so. For that reason, I may be a little less crisp on the detail than some of my colleagues on the rail side would be, but I assure all Members that their considerations will be heard and taken account of.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove will know, Northern is now running hundreds more services compared with last week. Clearly, there is an upside to this situation as well as a downside. By 2020, there will be more than 2,500 extra services a week with room for 40,000 extra passengers, and these will be, by and large,

faster and more comfortable journeys, with new and direct services across the north and beyond. Indeed, this week's timetable change, although we have properly and appropriately focused on the negative feedback that has occurred, has also been one that has delivered an extra 1,682 train services a week across the network.

As I have said, the Department for Transport is monitoring the situation very carefully. My colleagues have made it clear that if these teething problems are not resolved in the coming days, they will hold the industry to account—not merely the operators, but Network Rail itself, which is, I am afraid, at the heart of the problems that we have at the moment.

The beginning of the week, as my hon. Friends have noted, was a challenging time for customers of Northern and the TransPennine Express, and operators have appropriately apologised for the disruption. It is sometimes forgotten that they were upfront—perhaps not upfront enough—about the kind of disruption that they were expecting and the scale and the number of the changes. It is also right to note—the Secretary of State noted this himself earlier today—that many thousands of railway staff are working flat out to deliver the benefits of this enormous investment programme, and we should be celebrating their efforts. No one, least of all I or my colleagues, or indeed any Member of this House, wishes to see passengers face disruption, let alone on the scale that has been identified in the specific cases that have been picked out today. We understand the frustration that many have felt with this week's service. The hope is that passengers will become a little more understanding as these initial issues are addressed and as the wider benefits start to feed through.

As colleagues across the House will know, in this case, the franchises are managed by the Rail North Partnership jointly on behalf of the Department and Transport for the North. I am assured that the team, which is based in Leeds, has been closely monitoring the situation and liaising with both operators. There is a timetable recovery plan against which Northern expect to be monitored by the Rail North Partnership team. In response to my hon. Friend's question, I would not be surprised if a slightly more formal process of internal assessment were set up.

It is absolutely right for passengers to be compensated if they are affected by disruption. I hope that it is understood across the House that the Department has, with some effectiveness, worked with train operators to promote passengers' awareness of their compensation rights. Rail passengers are now more willing and more able than ever to demand and to receive, without undue disruption to their own timetables or cost, the compensation that they are due. Figures published for 2016-17 showed that more than £73 million was paid out to successful claimants—an increase of 63.8% on the previous year.

Both Northern and TransPennine Express operate this delay repay compensation scheme, which allows rail passengers to claim compensation for each delay of more than 30 minutes or more whatever its cause. There are no exclusions for weather or for other delays outside the control of the rail industry. One suspects that quite a lot of this compensation will spike as a result of the experience that we have had over the past few days.

In the case of multi-modal tickets, delay repay compensation is payable for delays that occur on the rail element of journeys covered by these tickets. Of

course, the train operating companies and the relevant local transport authorities remain responsible for this policy. The Department has worked very closely with the train operators to make those compensation claims as swift and as simple as possible, including through online claim forms, smartcards and online apps.

Let me turn now to the timetable. Northern has planned for some time to introduce these changes in two phases—one in December 2017 and the other in May 2018, with the latter being larger and more relevant. These were supposed to be underpinned by planned line speed improvements and electrification of the route between Manchester and Preston. Again, my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove, in a very incisive analysis, put his finger on the central problem, which was that this electrification did not take place on schedule and that had all of these knock-on effects, and of course, in a network, knock-on effects themselves have knock-on effects and the result creates further disruption.

The effect of the delays to the completion of the Manchester to Preston upgrade meant that Northern had to move some of its service enhancements to a later date. Further service enhancements for Northern and TransPennine Express are planned for introduction from the end of this year through until 2020. I am sure that colleagues will be working closely with the operators to ensure that they are put in place with minimum disruption. As a result, although the operators will be delivering an increase of 1,300 new services a week from May 2018, 900 services a week—disappointingly for customers—will not be delivered until the infrastructure is ready. Once that happens, it will be a further improvement.

It became apparent in the early part of this year that the electrification process would not be completed on schedule. My hon. Friend rightly targets the question whether enough notice was given at that time. This required a lot of rethinking and rejigging by Northern. Although we are in the midst of significant operational challenges, I am afraid to say that it is appropriate to recognise that they have not yet ended. Once wishes that it were not so, but there may still be some further localised service disruption. In a way, that is to be expected with any new timetable, but it is all the more regrettable given the current circumstances. Northern has assured us that it will continue to do everything it can to make certain that there is minimal service disruption and to keep customers informed. Officials in the Department have focused on ensuring that customers know that timetables are changing.

I will not go further than my hon. Friend in addressing the specific issues that he has experienced in his constituency and on the Buxton and Hazel Grove line into Manchester Piccadilly. He has done a good and accurate job of bringing these issues to the forefront of the House's attention. It is worth pointing out, however, that we will continue to see further improvements over time.

In Greater Manchester, Northern will begin to operate two trains an hour between Buxton and Manchester Piccadilly, significantly increasing the capacity on one of the most popular lines into the city. There will also be six trains an hour on weekdays between Rochdale and Manchester Victoria, as well as an hourly Sheffield to Manchester Piccadilly service every day. In Merseyside and Cheshire, Northern has made it clear that it will operate two weekday trains every hour between Southport and Manchester Victoria, two morning peak services

[*Jesse Norman*]

from Southport to Alderley Edge via Manchester Piccadilly and two evening peak services from Alderley Edge to Southport via Manchester Piccadilly. A host of other changes and improvements have been put in place.

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend is quite right to highlight the frequency improvements and particularly the upgrade of the rolling stock, with the removal of the Pacers. In the context that the franchise is improving and has ambitious long-term plans—I ought to own up that I was a Minister at the time of the franchise renewal so am slightly marking my own homework—we are talking about identifying the blockage that is stopping the benefits being delivered. Can he take back to the Department and all relevant officials the message that we need a concentrated effort on removing that blockage, with the completion of the electrification works, to allow the significant benefits of the new franchise ambitions to be delivered for the people of the north?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That point is all the more forceful from someone with his experience and terrific track record in the Department, and officials and those in the industry will take it properly seriously.

If we look more widely, the position remains in many ways extremely positive. The Government will have spent more than £13 billion between 2015 and 2020 on improving and modernising transport in various forms across the north. We are building HS2—the first new

north-south railway in this country for over a century—and will be providing better journeys through the new Northern and TransPennine Express franchises, albeit once the current disruption has settled. We are also investing well over £1 billion in improvements through the Great North rail project. As has been mentioned, Northern and TransPennine Express trains will be brand new or completely refurbished, and all Pacer trains will be gone. All that is to be welcomed.

Again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove and all colleagues for the contributions they have made. Once this present phase has been completed, passengers on Northern rail will benefit significantly through some 1,300 extra services a week and rail users will have many things to be hopeful about for the future—not just brand-new trains but improvements to stations as well to service quality. The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), has spoken to the chief executive of Transport for the North and the Mayor of Greater Manchester to underline his and the Department's commitment to improving performance for passengers. We continue to work closely with rail companies to drive down cancellations, and to support Network Rail and the wider industry in delivering these significant improvements. I suggest that those are all things for which we will ultimately be very grateful.

Question put and agreed to.

3.50 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 24 May 2018

[SIR HENRY BELLINGHAM *in the Chair*]

Gaza: Humanitarian Situation

1.30 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I place on record my thanks to the Chairman of Ways and Means, who allowed this debate to be facilitated before the House goes into recess.

The situation in Gaza for its 1.8 million residents is nothing short of inhumane, but before I turn to some of the specific concerns of many in Gaza and the wider Palestinian community, I want to comment briefly on the events of the last two months, which cannot possibly be divorced from the broader realities facing Palestinians.

The brutal response to the protests on the Gaza border during the last two months are a mark of shame on a deadlocked international community, giving succour to an Israeli Government acting with a lethal culture of impunity. That, I am afraid, has been exacerbated by the feeble response of our own Government, whose voice carries weight yet has been barely audible, and of course by the disgraceful comments and actions of President Trump.

The violence at the Gaza border since 30 March has been truly shocking: 112 Palestinians have been killed, 13,000 have been injured—3,500 of them with live ammunition—and 13 children have been killed. One Israeli soldier has been injured. Before I go any further, I want to acknowledge explicitly the responsibility of Hamas in stoking the protests and provoking Israel. Hamas is a terrorist organisation that refuses to recognise the right of Israel to exist, and Israel has a right to defend itself. As an occupying force, however, Israel must be held accountable for its actions and the attacks on protestors.

It is vital for the credibility of the international system that there is an urgent, independent, UN-led investigation into these grave violations of international law. The UK Government's decision to abstain in the Security Council vote was therefore shameful. Last Tuesday, the Minister assured the House that he endorsed calls for an international, independent and transparent inquiry into the appalling events unfolding in Gaza, yet when the UN Human Rights Council resolved on Friday to set up a commission of inquiry to undertake precisely that, the UK failed to join 29 partner countries and abstained in the vote. The Government alleged that the Human Rights Council resolution was "partial and unhelpfully unbalanced". Let me repeat the remit of the inquiry: it is to investigate

"all violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law",

and the resolution called on Israel and "all relevant parties" to co-operate fully—that includes Hamas and other Palestinian bodies.

The Government have called for the Israeli authorities to conduct their own so-called independent inquiry, but the Israeli Government have already made clear what they think of the incidents on the Gaza border. Israel's ambassador to the UK, Mark Regev, has described Israel's response as "surgical", and the Israeli Defence Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, claimed that there are "no innocent people" in the Gaza strip. Such an inquiry by the Israeli Government could not be independent and would have no credibility in the international community.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): We should all agree that the slaughter of unarmed civilians in Gaza is abhorrent. We need to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people at this time. While I agree with my hon. Friend on a UN-led inquiry, does she agree that a two-state solution is the only solution to the conflict and that we should be impressing that on all parties?

Louise Haigh: I agree. It remains Labour party policy, and indeed Government policy, to support a two-state solution, which is the only way forward for Israel and Palestine.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I know that Government policy and Labour party policy is a two-state solution, but I am increasingly concerned about how that could work practically on the ground. That makes me think we will have to find another way—perhaps a one-state solution, with everyone equal. I do not know, but the two-state solution becomes increasingly impossible as those tentacles of settlements go into places such as Area C in the west bank.

Louise Haigh: Of course, I understand hon. Members' and indeed wider society's concerns about the two-state solution and their frustration about its achievement, but I do not see a one-state solution as a possibility—I do not envisage that ever being acceptable to Israel. From conversations I have had with the Israeli Government and Israelis, it seems unacceptable from their perspective. However, I will make a little progress, if I may.

On the unacceptability of an Israeli-led inquiry, I ask the Minister: what does it say about the upholders of a rules-based international order that one of its principal architects, the UK, would allow the alleged perpetrators of violations of international law to conduct the investigation themselves? It makes an utter mockery of the international order. When repressive regimes the world over look at the actions of the democratic Israeli Government and the muted international condemnation, it is little wonder that they think, "Anything goes." What more evidence do the Government need to support calls for an independent investigation and to uphold that international order? The UN experts have been very clear.

The basic principles on the use of force and firearms by law enforcement officials require law enforcement officials to refrain from using lethal force on demonstrators "unless strictly unavoidable" to protect their own or others' lives. Their safety must be in actual danger. Those are the words of the independent UN. So my first ask of the Minister is, will he confirm what wording the Government would support in a UN resolution, and is the UK actively pushing for a more acceptable form of wording at the UN?

[*Louise Haigh*]

The direct and immediate humanitarian consequence of the Israeli security forces' actions has been on hospitals in Gaza. Even prior to this series of protest-related mass-casualty events, Gaza's health system was, according to the World Health Organisation, already "on the brink of collapse".

A medic who spoke to Medical Aid for Palestinians said that the types and numbers of injuries

"would overwhelm any European hospital and be classified as a 'major incident', let alone a local hospital in Gaza with a shortage of disposables and man power for this kind of injury."

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case on the need for a proper international reaction to Gaza's humanitarian emergency. Does she share my concern that hospitals in Gaza were seeking to deal with an incredibly serious issue yet did not even have some of the basic supplies that would be needed? Gauze, syringes and surgical gowns were all running out. Does she agree that we have a duty as part of the international community to ensure not only that there is not a repeat of the bloodshed but, as Medical Aid for Palestinians has called for, that Gaza's health sector is supported to develop in line with the needs of its residents?

Louise Haigh: I could not agree more. The health system in Gaza has long been under extreme pressure and on the brink of collapse, but now the medicines and materials needed to treat the wounded are dwindling. My hon. Friend mentioned several of those, and even saline solution is in short supply.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): In fact, there is another aspect to all of this. I visited Gaza when I first visited Palestine about 10 years ago, and I saw the rudimentary hospital conditions there at that time—goodness knows how they must be now. However, if I wanted to go back, I would not be able to, because it is next to impossible for parliamentarians from the United Kingdom to get into Gaza. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Minister could do something about that, and that that would help us all in this situation?

Louise Haigh: I recently visited Palestine and was unable to visit Gaza, so that would be very welcome.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on opening the debate. She is right to highlight the acute pressure on the health services in Gaza in relation to physical health. Of course, there is also a long-term mental health crisis in both Gaza and the wider region—including Israel—for people who are living constantly in the shadow of this terrible conflict. Does my hon. Friend agree that we also have a responsibility to ensure that those mental health needs are properly cared for?

Louise Haigh: Absolutely. The ongoing psychosocial, as well as physiological, implications of the woundings around the protest and of continued life under the blockade and the occupation cast a very long shadow for the entire Palestinian people. I believe Save the

Children did a recent survey of children in Gaza and found that a very high percentage of teenagers were bed-wetting due to continued trauma.

According to WHO estimates, 11% of people injured since the start of the demonstrations risk developing a permanent disability. That is more than 1,000 people who will be permanently disabled, putting further pressure on the health system.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I apologise that a prior speaking engagement means I cannot stay for the whole debate, although I will try to return. My hon. Friend makes an important point in setting out the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Does she agree that that situation legitimately demands protest—that it is legitimate to protest against it, regardless of the responsibility of Hamas or others for stoking the protests? Does she agree that the failure of the Israeli Government to allow and enable peaceful protest is not only causing the mental health issues, but ensuring that the situation grows worse and that there seems to be no other way but violent protest?

Louise Haigh: Each of us—every person in this world—has a fundamental human right to peaceful protest. Is it any wonder that ordinary people living in Gaza want to go and exercise that right, given the situation and the lives they are living?

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is setting out a very powerful case for UK intervention. Does she also agree that the UK should lead the call to remove illegal blockades of goods into Gaza?

Louise Haigh: Yes. The illegal blockade and the continuing occupation of Gaza by the Israeli Government are a fundamental part of the issue facing Gaza.

If our Government are unwilling or unable to put pressure on the Israeli Government to ease some of the causes of the humanitarian situation, we have a responsibility to the Palestinian people to address some of the symptoms that I have laid out today. The Government have committed £1.9 million in funding to UNICEF through the humanitarian fund of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs. However, answers to written questions suggest that the Government will not be renewing support to that fund. OCHA is renewing calls for urgent support for its humanitarian funds to meet the desperate humanitarian situation in the Gaza strip. Can the Minister commit to renewing support to that fund? The immediate medical needs in Gaza are dire, and the sheer number of injuries alone will require long-term support. It is surely unjustifiable to withdraw support at this time.

The recent mass-casualty event has only exacerbated a whole-system collapse in Gaza. As I mentioned earlier, I visited Israel and Palestine in February this year, with my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) and for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), and the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely). We were taken there by the excellent organisations the Council for Arab-British Understanding and Medical Aid for Palestine. We did not visit Gaza, but the situation there cast a long shadow across the rest of the country.

We visited Makassed hospital in East Jerusalem, a charitable hospital that provides healthcare to Palestinians, although they obviously struggle to access it because of restrictions on their travel as a result of checkpoints, the wall and the blockade of Gaza. We saw three newborn babies—triplets—born only days before. They were premature and tiny, in incubators and hooked up so that they could breathe properly. Their mother, a woman who had given birth to three babies only days before, was back in Gaza, having been ordered to leave East Jerusalem—part of Palestine, but annexed by Israel—because she was considered a security threat. She was separated from her newborn triplets.

We met a little boy who had a brain stem tumour and who was waiting to be operated on the next day. He was chatting away and laughing, blowing kisses at my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley and telling her that she was beautiful because she had rosy cheeks. There is an age restriction of 55 years on travel from Gaza, so his great-aunt was with him rather than his parents. He was being operated on the next day, and the surgeon was not hopeful about his chances. He was six years old.

The continued blockade of Gaza since 2005 and the restrictions on travel and trade have undeniably played their part in the horrific situation Gazans live in today. In 2012, the UN warned that Gaza would be unliveable by 2020. Unemployment is as high as 45% for men and 80% for women. At least 90% of the water is not fit to drink. The birth rate continues to increase, in the most overpopulated place on earth. Only 40% of the 12,000 houses demolished during the 2014 war have been rebuilt.

For the last three months, families in Gaza have been receiving around two to four hours of electricity per day. Gaza receives electricity from Israel, Egypt and a single power plant near Gaza City. Around 28 MW of electricity are provided to Gaza from Egypt every day, but there are frequent disruptions. The sole power plant in Gaza produces around 60 MW per day. Israel ordinarily provides around 120 MW per day to Gaza, but on 11 June last year Israel's security cabinet made a decision to reduce the supply by 40%, significantly exacerbating an electricity crisis that has long impacted Palestinian residents of Gaza.

Gaza now has daily blackouts of 18 to 20 hours, meaning that patients who rely on life-saving medical equipment are put at risk on a daily basis, and hospitals generally cannot function at their full capacity to ensure the health and wellbeing of patients. Water desalination facilities have been severely impacted by the lack of electricity. The impact on the hygiene and public health of the population is severe and a matter of grave concern, as sewage water cannot be treated or pumped away from residential areas. Currently, around 80% of Gaza's shoreline is polluted by untreated sewage, enabling the spread of waterborne diseases.

Is it any wonder, in these conditions, that what the former Prime Minister David Cameron called an "open-air prison" is a hotbed for extremism? The threats from the United States over funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency will inevitably mean that half the schools in Gaza funded by the UN will struggle, and children will be sent instead to Hamas-run schools. The humanitarian situation and Israel's actions are Hamas's best recruiting tools.

I know the Minister shares my concerns, but we need to step up. We cannot allow the desperate situation of Gazans to continue. Taking action will only serve to quell extremism and weaken Hamas. We need to hear a stronger, louder voice from the UK in the international community. We must bring pressure to bear on the Egyptian Government for their role. We must see UNRWA and OCHA properly funded and, yes, we must consider sanctions if international law continues to be flouted. Most importantly, we must ensure that the blockade is lifted and Gazans are allowed to travel, trade and have access to healthcare. If we do not do everything in our collective power to achieve that, the blood of many more Palestinians and Israelis will be on all our hands.

1.47 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), on securing this debate and the powerful way in which she has introduced it. I apologise to hon. Members, the shadow Minister and the Minister: I must get back to my constituency for an engagement later this afternoon, so depending on how long this debate goes on for, I may not be able to stay for the winding-up speeches. I will ask the Minister some questions, and I will avidly read his replies to them in *Hansard*.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, graphically laid out the nightmare that has been unfolding in Gaza—a nightmare that, frankly, we knew was coming. Back in 2012, the United Nations said that life in Gaza would be unliveable by 2020 because of the conditions that my hon. Friend described, but Robert Piper, the UN co-ordinator for humanitarian aid and development activities, says:

"that unliveability threshold has been passed quite a long time ago." That is the reality of living in Gaza today.

I want to ask the Minister about the UK's response to that humanitarian crisis, but before I do, I remind hon. Members that perhaps the greatest humanitarian issue of all is the right to life. More than 100 Palestinians have been killed and more than 12,000 injured since 30 March, most from the use of live fire by the Israeli military. I will press the Minister on the accountability for those deaths and injuries.

The Minister knows—my hon. Friend repeated this point—of the widespread concern in the House over the United Kingdom's failure last Friday to support the creation of an independent commission of inquiry by the United Nations Human Rights Council. What is the UK's position on the HRC's inquiry, now that it has been set up? Does the United Kingdom now accept the collective decision to create that body, even though it disagreed with it? Will it get behind and support that inquiry, and urge Israel to co-operate with it? If not, is the Minister saying that there is an obligation on member states to get behind collective decisions by the HRC and other UN bodies only if states happen to agree with them? If so, is that right reserved to the United Kingdom, or does he expect all states to exercise it?

Israel announced that it will conduct its own inquiry into the events in Gaza, as my hon. Friend said. Answering the urgent question on Monday, the Minister said that if such an inquiry

"is done solely by the Israeli legislative and judicial system, it is unlikely to carry the sort of confidence that the international community is looking for."

[Richard Burden]

He was not kidding about that. The United Nations commission of inquiry on the 2014 Gaza conflict said in 2015 that Israel has a

“lamentable track record in holding wrongdoers accountable”.

B’Tselem, the respected Israeli human rights organisation, said:

“The military’s announcement that the general staff investigation mechanism led by Brig. Gen. Motti Baruch will look into the incidents in which Palestinians were killed, focusing on civilian deaths, is pure propaganda, intended—among other things—to prevent an independent international investigation.”

To address those concerns, which the Minister seems to understand are out there, he told the House on Monday that he believes that the Israeli inquiry

“must have an international element to it.”—[*Official Report*, 21 May 2018; Vol. 641, c. 578.]

“Must” was used. Has that been put to the Israeli Government? If the Israeli Government accept that there should—must—be an independent international element to the inquiry, what mechanisms does the Minister think should be put in place to monitor that international element, to ensure that it provides transparency and independence, rather than a fig leaf for an “inquiry” that, in reality, is anything but?

What will be the UK’s response if Israel refuses that independent international element? Will the United Kingdom say at that stage that all we are left with is the HRC inquiry, and that we will get behind it? Will the UK argue proactively for another international mechanism? If so, what will that mechanism be? Or will the reality be that, if Israel says no to that international element, and the United Kingdom, United States and Israel absent themselves from the HRC inquiry, accountability will just go by the board? That would underline both what B’Tselem said about the recent events—that Israel is finding a way of avoiding accountability—and what the UN commission of inquiry in 2014 said, with this being another example of Israel’s lamentable record of holding wrongdoers to account. The difference will be that this time, the United Kingdom would be complicit in that process.

The second area of accountability on which I will question the Minister is arms sales. In the past two years, export licences to Israel have been provided for categories of arms and arms components including sniper and assault rifles, pistols, weapon sights, targeting equipment, ammunition for small arms and grenades, smoke canisters, tanks, combat and military helicopters, military support and combat aircraft and civil riot control protection equipment. The consolidated arms export criteria, under which the UK operates, say that licences should not be granted if there is a serious risk that arms or arms components will be used for

“internal repression or in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law”,

and that the need

“not to affect adversely regional stability in any significant way”

must be considered.

There is widespread concern about whether UK-supplied weapons or components have been used in Gaza. I raised the subject in a written question to the Minister before last week’s events. He told me in his reply that the Government

“do not collect data on the use of equipment after sale.”

I asked the Minister for clarification of that on 15 May, and he told me that thorough risk assessments are undertaken prior to the granting of licences, and that in the light of recent difficulties in Gaza,

“we have looked at all extant licences in relation to Israel.”

He went on to say that

“we have no information to suggest that UK-supplied equipment has been used against protesters.”—[*Official Report*, 15 May 2018; Vol. 641, c. 127.]

I would like clarity from the Minister on that latter point. Is he saying that weapons or weapons components exported from the UK being used in the recent events in Gaza would constitute a breach of the consolidated criteria? I am also unclear about the Minister’s saying that “extant licences” have been looked at. Is he saying that Ministers have looked to see if any new orders are likely for items covered by those licences, but with no concern about what arms already supplied have been used for? Or is he saying that he is making inquiries about the uses of items already supplied to inform decisions about future licences?

If it is the latter, how is he making those inquiries? Is it simply a question of asking Israel if arms or arms components exported there from the UK have been used in Gaza, or are any other checks being undertaken? I ask because in 2009 the Foreign Office decided that because of misleading statements made by the Israeli Government about such matters, it would no longer regard their word as reliable or sufficient to decide whether to grant an arms export licence. Has the Foreign Office changed its mind about that? Does it now see Israel’s word about the uses to which it puts arms and arms components imports from the UK as reliable enough? If so, what has changed to give the UK more confidence in that word? If the UK still does not see assurances from the Israeli Government as sufficient, what other checks are in place?

Before I close, I will say a couple of words about the UK’s response to the humanitarian crisis that my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, described. I was encouraged by the Minister’s commitment last week, when he said he was calling on the special representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations

“to bring forward proposals to address the situation in Gaza.”—[*Official Report*, 15 May 2018; Vol. 641, c. 138.]

I would be grateful if the Minister outlined whether our Government will make any recommendations to go with that call, and if so, what they will be. Will he engage with the Quartet on its proposal to address the water and electricity crisis in Gaza? I would also be interested to hear from the Minister on the likelihood of support for engagement with those processes from other international parties, including Israel.

To follow up on that, the Minister will be aware that in March the White House held a summit on Gaza that UK officials attended, and very little information has come out about that, so I would be grateful if he could outline whether any plan or proposals were discussed at the summit and what, if anything, is likely to come out of it.

I would like to add to the questions that my hon. Friend put to the Minister about the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs humanitarian fund. Last year, £1.9 million was donated to that fund through the UN Children’s Fund. That has

been supporting up to 1 million people in Gaza by providing clean water and rehabilitating sanitation facilities. I appreciate the efforts that the Minister put into securing that money.

However, the UN is now calling for an urgent replenishment of the humanitarian fund, because of the deteriorating situation in Gaza—a situation made worse by the cut in funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency from the United States. The pooled fund, which is being replenished now, is being supported by a range of countries, including Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Spain and Switzerland. However, we have still heard nothing from the UK Government about that. Despite their supporting the fund last year, responses from Ministers to written questions that I have tabled have given no indication at all about whether the Government plan to contribute to the fund this year. Given that the fund is addressing urgent needs in Gaza and that this Minister has said repeatedly—wearing, I guess, his Department for International Development hat, rather than his Foreign Office hat—that his Department stands ready to respond to spikes in need, will he accept that we are seeing a very obvious spike in need in Gaza, and will he give us a clear indication today of whether the UK Government will support the United Nations OCHA humanitarian fund?

I would be very grateful if the Minister could respond to the points I have made when he replies to the debate, and I again apologise if I am not able to be here to hear that reply.

2.2 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing this important debate. May I add my apologies? Whether I am able to be here for the whole debate will depend on what time it ends. I certainly hope that I can, but if not, I apologise to you, Sir Henry, to the Minister and to the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton).

Last week's tragic events on the Gaza border underline the need for urgent action to address the plight of the Palestinian people. In the past decade, Gaza has endured three wars. Ending the spiral of violence requires us to tackle the toxic cocktail of hopelessness and desperation that underpins it. As Labour Friends of Israel set out in its pledge for Gaza earlier this year, we need a multifaceted approach, with political, diplomatic and economic strands.

First, Israel should lead an international effort to assist with the economic revitalisation of Gaza. That should utilise its burgeoning relationships in the Arab world—something that Avi Gabbay, leader of the Israeli Labour party, suggested last week that Benjamin Netanyahu has singularly failed to do. In February, Israel presented an international conference with a list of infrastructure projects in Gaza that it would like donors to fund, and offered to provide technical support and know-how. Those projects included installing a new high-voltage line that would double the amount of electricity that Israel supplies to Gaza; laying a natural gas pipeline from Israel to Gaza; and building a sewage purification plant. I urge Israel to go further and urgently consider the plans, first presented by the Labour member of the Knesset Omer Barlev in 2014 and since discussed by Ministers, for a seaport on an artificial island off the Gaza coast that would both ease the flow of goods into the strip and meet Israel's legitimate security requirements.

Secondly, the international community should honour the reconstruction pledges made at the Cairo conference in 2014. Britain, the US and our European partners have done so, but Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates have thus far failed to meet their obligations. World Bank figures show disbursement ratios of significantly less than 50%.

Thirdly, the Palestinian Authority's control over Gaza must be reasserted. Previous efforts to secure a reconciliation agreement have foundered, and the PA's misguided attempts to exert pressure—for instance by cutting the supply of electricity to Gaza—have simply added to the suffering of the Gazan people. I commend Egypt for its attempts to re-establish the PA's authority in Gaza and urge a new, more imaginative and less blunt effort by President Abbas's Administration.

Finally, the root of Gaza's problems lays in the brutal rule of Hamas. It has deprived the people of their civil rights, including their right to new elections. It has used Gaza as a base from which to launch terrorist and rocket attacks on Israel and, as the Red Crescent made clear last year, shown callous disregard for the lives of the Gazan people.

Bob Stewart: Will the right hon. Lady give way on that point?

Joan Ryan: I will not, because there is time for hon. Members to make a contribution should they so wish and should you call them, Sir Henry.

Hamas has spent Gaza's resources arming itself and preparing for war. Indeed, it is estimated that the cement used for the 32 Hamas tunnels that Israel uncovered at the outset of the 2014 conflict could have built two hospitals, 20 clinics, 20 schools or two nurseries. As well as restocking its arsenal of weaponry, Hamas has used the past four years to rebuild its terror tunnels, placing them underneath apartment blocks, schools and the Kerem Shalom crossing—the main route into Gaza for humanitarian aid. The Oslo accords require the demilitarisation of the Palestinian territories. President Abbas demands the principle of “one state, one government, one gun”. The international community must take action to stop the flow of weapons to Hamas and to assist in its disarmament.

I have had the pleasure of visiting on a number of occasions the Nir Oz kibbutz on the Gaza border. Its brave and resourceful people live under the constant threat of Hamas rocket attack and have suffered terribly in the past. However, they bear the people of Gaza no ill will; they wish for them only the peace and security that they wish for themselves and their children. Their attitude should be an example to us all as we strive for an end to violence, and the pursuit of co-existence, reconciliation and, yes, a two-state solution as the only route to a lasting peace for Israel and Palestine.

2.7 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this very important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing it.

I do not want to repeat the statistics that have already been referred to, but I think that we need to look dispassionately at the evidence of the unfolding catastrophe that we are witnessing in Gaza. I would like to echo the

[*Grahame Morris*]

comments of other Members. My experience when I was part of a delegation to the occupied territories was that we were not able to effect entry into Gaza. I appeal to the Minister to try to make representations to the Israeli Government to ensure that that is possible.

According to Oxfam, at least 80% of the population in Gaza rely on humanitarian aid to survive. It is clear that many—in fact, nearly all—of the key industries were destroyed during the three military interventions, and as a consequence more than 60% of Gazan youth are unemployed. I understand that that is the highest rate in the world.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) referred to the actions of Hamas. Clearly, Opposition Members and, I think, Members across the whole House condemn violent actions. In truth, the Gaza blockade began long before Hamas came to power in Gaza. I remind my right hon. and hon. Friends that it started with Israel cancelling the general exit permit out of the Gaza strip in 1991. To suggest that the current situation in Gaza is down to Hamas alone does not fit into the facts or the realities on the ground. Gaza has been accurately described as a vast open prison, a strip of territory hermetically sealed from the outside world by Israel and Egypt. Since 2007, Israel has repeatedly attacked fishermen off the Gazan coast. A number have been killed and more than 30 injured in recent years as a result of the policy of restricting the distance from the coast that the Gazan fishermen are allowed to fish to between three and six nautical miles.

The irony is that Gaza does potentially have some natural resources and some opportunity to trade, not least the quite extensive gas reserves that have been discovered off the coast, with an estimated value of \$4 billion. Israel's military completely destroyed Gaza's seaports in 2002 and its airport in 2001. That prevents Palestinians from engaging in direct trade with the outside world. Palestinians are barred from using about 20% of their own land space, as this is kept as a buffer zone, which Israel maintains as a kill zone, whereby Palestinians risk death if they dare to enter the area near the Gaza fence.

Not a single rocket has been fired from Gaza in the last two months, yet Israel, as we have seen, has used lethal violence against Palestinians in Gaza, while the Israelis are claiming to be the victims. I saw figures relating to the recent short period in May, which showed that 68 Palestinians were killed. Israel has multiple non-lethal methods of addressing civilian protests, and it uses them frequently. It has much expertise in such methods. Indeed, it sells them to the rest of the world. In the opinion of many, shooting live ammunition into mass, dense protests—indeed, any protest—is a war crime, and there must be repercussions. As my right hon. and hon. Friends have indicated, there must be an independent international investigation into these events. The use of live ammunition must be the very last resort and can only ever be justified where there is proven immediate threat to life and not under any other circumstance.

On Monday 14 May, there were at least 1,359 patients in Gaza's hospitals with a variety of gunshot injuries, some of them life-changing. That was in a single day. I saw reports in our own newspapers of the Canadian President, Justin Trudeau, protesting about a Canadian

doctor who was deliberately shot while he was tending to wounded Palestinians at some distance from the border fence. Palestinians are protesting in life-threatening situations because they are willing to risk their own lives for what they believe in. They believe in dignity, freedom of movement, access to electricity, clean water and the right to return home. Those are fundamental human rights, which I believe everyone in this room would support.

In Gaza, 95% of the water is undrinkable. There are between two and four hours of electricity a day, on average. There is at least 45% unemployment, and over half of the children are suffering acute mental stress. A very large percentage are suffering acute anaemia, presumably as a consequence of the unsafe drinking water. Over the half the population in Gaza are refugees from places within short journeys just outside the strip, in Israel. According to Jason Cone, the executive director of Doctors Without Borders, most of the wounded patients in Gaza felt that they had no hope, nothing to lose and no jobs. They told medical staff that they were willing to go back and die at the protest sites. Many wounded protesters were returning to the demonstrations with casts, on crutches and with external fixators holding together their shattered bones.

The level of violence, with the throwing of stones and petrol bombs and other such activities, did not reach the stage that would justify the hostilities threshold, and therefore the use of live rounds should be limited to non-lethal law enforcement methods. Israeli police have used violent repression against Palestinian citizens in Israel protesting against the Gaza violence, even breaking the leg of one protestor and arresting scores of others. The only way we can alleviate the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza is simply for Israel to lift the blockade and allow Gaza to have a viable electricity supply, clean drinking water for the population, access to decent medical supplies, a fully functioning sewage system and freedom of movement.

2.16 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I welcome this debate and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing it. It gives us the opportunity to discuss what has been happening in Gaza.

I have been contacted by more than 800 constituents since Monday of last week, when, as we have been reminded, 60 people died in protests in Gaza and 2,771 were injured, 1,359 of them by live ammunition. The protests, which had been building up over a period of weeks, were provoked in part by the reckless decision of the United States to move its embassy to Jerusalem. I regret that that decision was taken and has been put into effect. It was predicted what would happen if that decision was taken, and that is precisely what has happened.

There are a variety of views about the rights and wrongs of what happened in Gaza on Monday last week. I want to quote Human Rights Watch, whose judgments are broadly accepted as fair. It summarises:

“Israel has a right to defend its borders, but shooting unarmed protesters who haven't breached its frontier is disproportionate and illegal.”

I think that most of us would share that conclusion on the rights and wrongs of what happened.

My hon. Friend referred to the culpability of Hamas in all of this, and was absolutely right to do so. To pursue that point further, I will again quote Human Rights Watch on the contribution of Hamas to events last week. It said:

“Certainly Hamas has supported the protests in Gaza, where its control is palpable. Criticism of Hamas rule can be punishable by arrest and torture, as Human Rights Watch has documented. Hamas reviews the sermons at Gaza’s mosques, and those sermons now tell worshipers to join the demonstrations at the Gaza border. On ordinary days, Hamas police officers prevent demonstrators from coming within 1,000 feet of the border fence inside Gaza, the distance that Israel has declared to be a ‘no go zone.’ Since March 30, Hamas has allowed protesters through and hired buses to transport people to the demonstrations.”

Like my hon. Friend and other hon. Members, I affirm Hamas’s culpability in what is happening, but those observations underline the strength of Human Rights Watch’s conclusion that what happened on the part of the Israeli army was nevertheless disproportionate and illegal.

I visited Gaza a long time ago—13 years ago—with Christian Aid to look at the situation. At that time, it was very, very grim. I remember meeting families who could not get basic healthcare for their children, farmers whose everyday livelihood was being interfered with by petty restrictions and difficulties of one sort or another, and other people, such as a student on holiday from university who was stuck at the border crossing for a week and unable to go home, where she had hoped to spend her vacation. There were endless indignities and problems.

That was 13 years ago, and the position today is vastly worse. Under international law, Israel, as the occupying power in Gaza, has primary responsibility for meeting the humanitarian needs of Palestinians, but the position is dire. We have already been reminded that in 2012, the United Nations forecast that Gaza would be unliveable by 2020. In July, it published an update to that view. In his foreword, Robert Piper, the UN co-ordinator for humanitarian aid and development activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, said that “life for the average Palestinian in Gaza is getting more and more wretched.”

The report continued:

“Reviewing the indicators which in 2012 led the UN to question whether Gaza would become ‘unliveable’ by 2020, it is clear that very little progress has been made”

in the intervening five years, and said:

“Despite the warnings issued by the UN in 2012, Gaza has continued on its trajectory of de-development”.

When I visited 13 years ago the position was grim, but a couple of years later the blockade began. It has been in place for more than 10 years. According to the UN’s July report, in that period GDP has fallen by half; unemployment has reached an extraordinarily high level, with youth unemployment at about 60%, as we have heard; and access to safe drinking water through the public water network has plummeted from 98.3% in 2000 to 10.5% in 2014.

Other hon. Members have referred to the daily blackouts in the electricity supply and the strain on the health service. I will say a bit about that latter point, because I vividly remember meeting families who could not get access to basic healthcare. The World Health Organisation reports that in 2017, the number of permits issued by

Israel for Palestinians to leave Gaza to access healthcare reached a record low. The proportion of those who applied who actually got a permit was 54%, the lowest since the World Health Organisation started to keep the figures in 2008. The WHO made the point:

“There has been a continuous decline in approval rates since 2012,” when 93% were successful. It also reported that in 2017, 54 Palestinians died following the denial of a permit or a delay in issuing a permit. Of those, 46 had cancer. It is very difficult to understand why people who need urgent cancer treatment are being denied permits to leave Gaza to obtain it.

Another problem that people in Gaza have to contend with is a basic lack of calories. In the assessment I referred to earlier about what is going on in Gaza, Human Rights Watch said:

“Until 2010, Israel counted the number of calories that Gaza residents would be allowed to consume, sorted by age and gender, and then used mathematical formulas to restrict the amount of food entering Gaza to no more than what...officials deemed necessary.”

That was defended as

“‘economic warfare’ aimed at weakening Hamas by restricting supplies to residents of Gaza and halting production and trade. It had the opposite effect. Faced with these shortages, the Hamas regime in Gaza consolidated power, handing out food and cash to the poor, hiring the unemployed as public servants, and opening a lucrative trading system via tunnels underneath the border with Egypt.”

We all dearly want to see a two-state solution—a secure Israel alongside an autonomous and independent Palestinian state—but we can all see that time is running out for achieving that solution. I genuinely do not know what the Israeli Government think the long-term solution will be, but the viability of a two-state solution is being continually eroded by the establishment of settlements pepper-potting Palestine. It is increasingly difficult to see how what appears to be the only possible secure and peaceful outcome can be achieved.

I will finish by underlining the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, and others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), asked and pressing the Minister on whether the British Government will contribute again to the Occupied Palestinian Territories humanitarian fund. I welcome the fact that we contributed to it last year, and the need for it seems as compelling as ever. I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us whether, as I hope, the British Government will contribute again this year.

2.27 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. Monday 14 May will go down as a dark day in history. In Jerusalem, crowds listened to Baptist minister Robert Jeffress reading a prayer to mark the opening of the American embassy—a man who has previously made deeply offensive comments about Jews, Muslims, Mormons and gay people. In Tel Aviv, people danced the night away to the music of their new Eurovision winner, Netta. And in Gaza, an hour or so down the coast, 60 people, including children, were killed under live fire.

This is, of course, an emotional debate. It has touched us here, and it has touched my constituents. At times last week, I was receiving emails at a rate of more than

[Lyn Brown]

one a minute. My constituents are angry and upset about what happened, and so am I. As Members of Parliament, we have a duty to represent that anger, but we also need to think seriously about what happened and what a meaningful response might look like, so I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) for securing the debate. As we heard again this afternoon, she is a powerful, articulate and passionate advocate for the causes she takes up.

Before I go any further, I want to make it clear that I do not defend or dispute the disgraceful conduct of Hamas. They waved swastikas in the protests, which was a simply awful thing to do. They supplied maps to protesters, with directions to homes in the nearest Jewish communities. They spread downright lies about breaches in the fence, manipulating protesters and encouraging them to run towards the heavily armed and fortified fence. They have also claimed that 50 of the 60 people who died on 14 May were part of their organisation. I understand this, and I do not condone it—in fact, I utterly and totally condemn it.

However, I think that most of us can agree that the response of the Israeli Government was massively disproportionate. I think it came from a legacy of seeing the people of Gaza as nothing more than a security threat and shamefully denying their humanity, their rights and the conditions in which they have been living. In every so-called “Gaza war”, we have seen civilians being treated like enemy soldiers. It is a systemic problem.

The testimony of one Israeli defence force officer, given to the Israeli organisation Breaking the Silence in 2014, is a stark example of that. He said:

“The rules of engagement are anything inside”—
that is, inside the Gaza strip—

“is a threat, the area has to be ‘sterilised’, empty of people—and if we don’t see someone waving a white flag, screaming, ‘I give up’...then he’s a threat and there’s authorization to open fire”.

The interviewer asked the officer:

“When you say open fire, what does that mean?”

The officer replied:

“Shooting to kill. This is combat in an urban area, we’re in a war zone. The saying was: ‘There’s no such thing there as a person who is uninvolved.’”

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley said earlier, Avigdor Lieberman, the Israeli Defence Minister, echoed that officer’s sentiments just last month, when he said:

“There are no innocent people in the Gaza Strip...Everyone’s connected to Hamas.”

There is plenty more like that. There are similar testimonies describing Operation Cast Lead in 2009, Operation Pillar of Defence in 2012 and Operation Protective Edge in 2014—the repeated bloody episodes that have marked the blockade of the Gaza strip, which has now been going on for more than 10 years.

Again and again, we hear reports of the devastation of life in Gaza, which, in my view, often amounts to war crimes. We are told that such action is legitimate self-defence, but we need to say loudly and clearly that self-defence does not allow free rein to kill, to destroy property and infrastructure, and to effectively enact collective punishment

of a people. Avi Dichter, chair of the Knesset’s foreign affairs and defence committee, said that Israel’s security forces

“won’t let anyone put soldiers, and certainly not civilians, in danger”.

Then he said:

“The IDF has enough bullets for everyone.”

He said that last Monday, while the death count was still rising.

Again and again, security is linked with deadly, disproportionate attacks on civilians. I want to add my voice to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) when he called for a suspension of the export of arms to Israel. I cannot see that there is any justification for us to continue those exports.

Security was the excuse for Myanmar’s attacks on the Rohingya people. Security is also the excuse for the attacks on the Kurds, who are our allies in the fight against Daesh, and who I feel this Government have abandoned. And, for many years now, security has been used as an excuse for what can only be described as collective punishment in Gaza.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) has already said, when the blockade began, Israeli defence officials calculated the bare minimum of food needed to avoid malnutrition in Gaza. Surely that was not necessary for security. As my right hon. Friend also said, 54 Palestinians died last year waiting for travel permits, which they needed to receive life-saving medical care outside the Gaza strip. Surely that was not necessary for security. Now in Gaza, as we have heard, there are about four hours of electricity each day; between 90% and 97% of the water is contaminated, mainly by sewage; food is scarce; 80% of people are dependent on foreign aid; and, for some children, breakfast is a cup of hot water with a sprinkle of salt. Is that what security has to look like?

The people of Gaza have nothing, so they have absolutely nothing to lose. Omar Ghraieb, a journalist and blogger in the Gaza strip, said in January:

“Despair isn’t even the right word to describe what’s going on here because things are getting worse and worse”.

Many of the protesters knew that they risked their lives by going to the demonstration last Monday, because the IDF had considerably dropped leaflets to tell them so, but many thousands of people protested peacefully anyway. I think that the protesters’ decision to attend a demonstration when they had been told that doing so would put their lives at risk speaks volumes. They had faith in their future as a nation, but they no longer had hope for themselves individually.

I have to tell the Minister, who knows—I hope—that I hold him in really high regard, that we have reached an absurd situation. We have always said that a decision on the status of Jerusalem would be postponed until it could be part of a negotiated peace. Now the city has effectively been recognised as the Israeli capital by the United States, which is arguably the most powerful country in the world. The United States has seemingly made a unilateral decision on behalf of us all.

I do not think that we can allow this reckless US diplomacy, for want of a better word, to represent the international community, because it clearly does not. In the other place, the International Relations Committee

has recommended “serious consideration” of the recognition of the state of Palestine, so I have considered it, and it seems to me that this is the kind of important, pivotal moment when recognising a Palestinian state would do meaningful good.

I do not believe that there has ever been a more urgent need to recognise Palestine. Is there a more opportune moment waiting for us just round the corner? I have been observing and speaking about this situation for years, and a realistic peace process seems to be getting more remote. I honestly think that we need to recognise Palestine now, so that these two historic nations can work towards a shared future together, and so that the people of Gaza can imagine a better future for themselves and their children. I do not believe that prevaricating about when we should do this remains a viable option. The status quo in Gaza is no longer an option. The time is now.

2.37 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I begin by drawing attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Last November, I travelled to the west bank as a guest of Medical Aid For Palestinians, which does excellent work not just in the west bank but in Gaza. I am grateful to it, to Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights, Palestine Briefing, and of course the Britain-Palestine all-party parliamentary group, under the excellent chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), for the briefings that they have provided for the debate.

We have the rare privilege of time this afternoon. I do not intend to abuse that, for once, and I will not repeat the excellent speeches that have already been made, not least that of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who gave a superb introduction to this subject. I congratulate her on securing this debate from the Chairman of Ways and Means.

I hope that this debate gives the Minister time to answer questions at greater length than is normally possible in Question Time or during statements in the Chamber. I do not want to butter him up, but he has immense knowledge of his brief and thinks about it in a considered way. Let me put it this way: Opposition Members are always very indignant when junior Ministers turn up when Secretaries of State should be there, but I never hear that in the case of the Foreign Office. However, there could be two reasons for that. I will leave it at that.

Rather than going through the facts and figures we have heard—they are important—I will give my impression from my visits to Gaza. I first went nearly 10 years ago with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield. We went through Erez from Israel in 2009. I think we were probably the last parliamentary delegation that was allowed in. A couple of years later, I had an exciting fast drive with the military across Sinai to Rafah with my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and Lord Steel. I wish I had been able to go to Gaza since then. I have been to the west bank several times since, but I do not believe it is possible to go to Gaza now. I think Sinai is too dangerous at the moment. Can the Minister address whether we can get Israel to allow, in addition to the visits it allows from humanitarian organisations, parliamentary delegations to visit?

The visit I made at the beginning of 2009, which was less than three weeks after the conclusion of the first war on Gaza in recent years—Operation Cast Lead—was the most traumatic experience I have ever had. The only thing I can think of that compares with it is Grenfell last year, and that was not an intentional act and was on a much smaller scale, although it was much closer to home. Some of the things I saw there were utterly horrific and barely describable. I met survivors in families in which 20 or 30 members had been killed. Some had been killed by sniper fire. Others had been killed by more severe weapons of war, such as jets, gunboats and tanks.

What really made an impression on me was visiting hospitals that had been shelled by tanks. We visited industrial estates and villages that had been completely razed to the ground. We saw mosques, other public buildings and the Parliament, which had been deliberately destroyed. I visited a garden in the hospital that had been funded by DFID where phosphorous—illegal weaponry—was still smoking three weeks later. Those are war crimes. They are breaches of international humanitarian law and the Geneva convention, but Israel commits such breaches every day.

In three wars on Gaza—not just Protective Edge, which was the most recent in 2014, but Pillar of Defence in 2012 and Cast Lead—more than 5,000 Palestinians died. Most of them were civilians, and many were children. That is a consequence of waging war on a very densely populated civilian area. Obviously those wars were far more severe than what has happened in recent weeks, but we saw what happened in recent weeks. Often we do not see what happens in Gaza as a result of bombing and shelling, or we can only bear witness to it afterwards. Some 53% of injuries between the end of March and the middle of May were by live fire—the majority. We saw people a long way back from the border being picked off by sniper fire, and weaponry being used that maimed and permanently maimed. That is not accidental; it is a deliberate strategy. Even if one accepted a need for Israel to use force in the circumstances, I do not believe for a moment that that type of force or that type of weaponry or live fire needed to be used. That is what is so outrageous.

According to the Medical Aid for Palestinians briefing, 238 health personnel were injured in that period. Some 38 ambulances were damaged and 16 medical workers were hit by live ammunition. One was killed. That is targeting, as often happens, of medical and relief facilities, which again is illegal. That is the situation we find ourselves in. The counter-briefing about it all being Hamas people and so forth does not explain those facts.

We need to remind ourselves of certain basic facts in relation to Gaza. First, as the UK Government acknowledge, Gaza is still under occupation. Even though there was a withdrawal of Israeli settlers and troops to the border of Gaza, it is, under international law, considered to be under occupation because it is completely constrained.

The point is often made by supporters of the Israeli Government that although Israel withdrew, that did not solve the problem. The motivation for withdrawal, given what has since happened with the wars and blockade, was less to do with the withdrawal of relatively small numbers of settlers—certainly as compared with what has happened in the west bank—than it was about demography. It is about Israel having its cake and

[Andy Slaughter]

eating it. As the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said, Israel does not want a one-state solution, but it makes a two-state solution impossible, so the compromise is the creation of these Bantustans like Gaza. That is what withdrawal from Gaza is about: it is about isolating almost 2 million Palestinians so that they do not count, and do not raise questions about why they do not get a vote and why a one-state solution is not possible.

I would like to hear from the Minister on some issues, if he has time to address them. The march and the demonstrations were primarily about the right to return. That issue is not often addressed by the British or other Governments because of the other more pressing matters, but it is a real concern. The vast majority of the population of Gaza are refugees from '48, or possibly from '67 more recently, or from elsewhere. What is our policy on that? It is one of the final status matters that has to be addressed. That is a specific issue that is being raised here. In what Palestinians refer to as Nakba, 700,000-plus people were forced to leave their home or fled in terror. They want to know what the solution is to that issue. It is a perfectly reasonable request to make, but it is one that is not addressed.

The more immediate problem that we often address is the blockade, the imprisonment of 1.8 million people in this open prison, and the act of collective punishment, which is clearly what this is. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) gave the example of the rationing of food, bringing people down to starvation levels to put pressure on the Government. That is a clear indication of that collective punishment. What is the UK Government's response to that punishment continuing—and accelerating because of the effect on water and sewage systems, and the cumulative effect of this having gone on for a decade or more? What are we doing to help the peace process, and the process of Palestinian unity?

I have no more time for Hamas than anyone else who has spoken. It did win a free and fair election in 2006, but its conduct since then has placed it beyond the pale. There has not been the opportunity to have an election since then, and Israel's active co-operation is needed for that to happen. Of course the Palestinian Authority, Fatah, Hamas and the other parties also need to enable that to happen—that is not impossible with international support—but Israel is the key, as are the attitudes that we and other EU countries take. Elections would be an important step forward—one that we do not hear much about.

Earlier this week, I raised the issue of human rights organisations. In response, the Minister said he thought I had made my mind up on the issue. I referred to the case of Omar Shakir, the director of Human Rights Watch in Israel and Palestine, whom I met last year when I was over there. He is a well respected, hard-working individual in the international human rights community, but he is threatened with deportation. Yesterday, a court granted an injunction to allow him to stay in Israel until proceedings have completed. That is good news, and it is right that we recognise that an Israeli court made that decision, but I do not agree with the Minister that there is nothing the Government can do in such cases. Other Governments have raised concerns about that.

If I have made up my mind about this, it is on the basis of evidence. The organisations that we meet, both here and when we are over there—B'Tselem, Breaking the Silence and Israeli human rights organisations; Palestinian organisations, including al-Haq; and international organisations such as Amnesty International—are constantly under pressure from the Israeli Government and parts of the Israeli establishment in a way that they have not been before. They are made enemies in their own country. We have to support them not just financially, by encouragement, and by meeting them and listening to them, but by taking up their case, because they do extraordinary good work and are instrumental in trying to bring communities together.

I make no apologies for raising the issue that we always raise: recognition, which my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) mentioned. It is difficult to see, given not just the vote in Parliament but the facts on the ground, why the UK Government will not recognise the state of Palestine. The answer given is: "We don't believe it's the right time." I would like the Minister to say why he does not think it is the right time, and what indicators might lead us to suggest that it is the right time.

Settlements are a huge part of the problem, and not just because they are a form of colonisation. With settlements come the whole infrastructure of occupation—the wall, checkpoints and everything like that—which then need security, for the protection of the settlers. I am not talking about boycott, divestment and sanctions. I have never been a particular supporter of BDS because it is a blunt weapon. We should address the specific issues where Israel has got it wrong, and where we have got it wrong. One is on recognition; another is on trading with settlements.

I cannot for the life of me understand why, given that—as we repeat constantly—settlements are illegal under international law, we say that it is a matter of choice for people in the UK to buy settlement goods. Settlement goods should not be available, and British companies that support settlements, financially or otherwise, should not be doing so. Those would be good steps, along with those already mentioned. I cannot better what my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield, said about arms, an issue that he has looked into. Where atrocities have been committed—as they are being at the moment—including during the wars on Gaza, we should not have supplied arms to the Israelis. I accept that Israel is an ally and a friendly country to us in many ways, but we have to be tough with our friends sometimes. I cannot see why we continue to do that.

The issue at the bottom of this is always the occupation. This is a 60-year occupation, which is very unusual, even in what is an incredibly dangerous and quite horrific world at the moment, given the many things that are happening. It is a matter of shame to the international community that we have not done more to address it. What causes most difficulty for those of us who advocate for the Palestinians is that there is very little recognition by Government of the inequality of arms. It has to be, "Yes, 5,000 Palestinians have been killed, but some Israelis have been killed as well." Of course every single death is a tragedy, but I was struck by the column that Gideon Levi wrote in *Haaretz* this week, in which he posed the question: what would happen if it was the other way around? What would happen if 60 Israelis had been killed while the Palestinians

were celebrating a music festival and opening an embassy in Ramallah? I think there would have been extraordinary international outcry. I cannot bear the double standard.

There is so much to admire about the state of Israel and everything that it has done in that time, but its treatment of the Palestinians is a stain, and is something that we should not shy away from, but confront. If the Minister were able to put a bit more flesh on the bones of these issues than is normally possible, we would all be very grateful.

2.54 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few brief things in this timely debate, which I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing. I remind hon. Members of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—I serve as a member of the advisory board of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding, which funded a trip that I made last year to the west bank, along with Medical Aid for Palestinians.

I will not repeat the excellent points that have been made in this afternoon's debate. Like the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), I want to allow the Minister as much time as possible to respond. For the benefit of the record, I concur with everything that has been said about the excessive use of force in recent weeks. We have seen the tragic results of that, and of the incredible situation of the United States opening its embassy in East Jerusalem.

I regret the United Kingdom's abstention in the United Nations Human Rights Council vote last week. It is a principle of natural justice that nobody should be a judge in their own cause. Even if we thought that Israel could be relied on to conduct an investigation into what has gone on there in recent weeks, notwithstanding all the evidence to the contrary, we should not wish to see that happen, and Israel herself, if she is to respect the norms of international law, should not seek to do so. However, we are where we are.

The Minister put the Government's position on the record very fully on Monday in answer to an urgent question, but the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) has asked the questions that need to be answered today. What is the view of the United Kingdom Government in relation to the conduct of that Human Rights Council investigation, and what demands will the United Kingdom make of Israel to ensure that there is international and objective input into the investigation that it is to carry out, if that is how it is to be done?

The answers to those questions need to be robust if the position that has been taken by the United Kingdom last week and this week is to have any credibility in the eyes of the international community. Other hon. Members have said that we have a substantial voice on the world's stage that should be heard and has not been heard, which is a fair comment. That is why it is all the more important that we hear what the United Kingdom is going to do to ensure that it can honour the basis on which it has advanced its position.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith spoke about the position of Omar Shakir, so I do not think that I need to do so, other than simply to say that I agree with what

the hon. Gentleman said. It would be good to hear from the Minister today what representations we are making to the Israeli Government, because Omar Shakir's position is a novel one. This is the first occasion on which Israel has used those deportation powers in relation to somebody who is already resident in Israel in accordance with all Israeli law and immigration regulations.

Over the years, I have worked very closely with different groups in my constituency, as well as those with whom I work here. In Orkney, I have a very active group called Orkney Friends of Palestine. Over the years we have built links with agricultural communities on the west bank. Orkney is a farming community, so we understand the issues that they face. When dealing with something of the nature and scale of the situation facing the people in Gaza, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the enormity of it and to lose sight of the human impact, so the aspect that I want to put to the Minister today is the position of the Gazan fishing industry. I represent Orkney and Shetland, and I am an islander by birth and by choice. One third of Shetland's economy depends on fishing, so when we consider the position of the Gazan fishing community and industry, we understand just how desperate their situation is, and how the enormous entrepreneurial, self-starting instincts of so many people in Gaza have been constantly thwarted. That is how they become so frustrated and ground down.

Currently, the Israeli Government permits Palestinians to fish up to only six nautical miles from the coast. The Oslo accord says it should be 20 nautical miles. In fact, they have never been allowed to fish beyond 12 nautical miles. B'Tselem reports that the Israeli Government routinely prohibit entry into Gaza of all the normal materials that we would find in every boatyard and every chandler's shop in Lerwick today. The steel cables, the fibreglass and the spare parts are all denied to the Palestinian fishermen, because, in the view of the Israeli Government, they are dual-use materials.

The scale of oppression is difficult to understand. I ask myself how I would feel if the fishermen of my constituency were denied the opportunity to ply their trade and pursue their lifestyle, because fishing is, of course, more than their occupation—it is a vocation of sorts. On behalf of the Gazan fisherman, I say to the Minister, surely something can be done.

[SIR DAVID AMESS *in the Chair*]

3.1 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I assume the change of Chair was a planned changeover and that Sir Henry is not bolting just because I was up next.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing the debate. Without meaning to be flippant, to get a last-minute debate on the afternoon before recess shows commitment, and I commend her for bringing it forward. The importance of the Gaza humanitarian situation is reflected in the turnout here this afternoon. There have been Back-Bench contributions from seven hon. Members and other interventions in support of them.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley set out the problems well and outlined the scale of the violence, commenting on its disproportionality—there has been

[Alan Brown]

only one Israeli soldier injured, compared with all the deaths and injuries for Gaza's population. She stated that the resolution that the UK Government refused to back is not biased and, correctly, called on them to make clear what wording would be acceptable. I would like to hear the Minister's response to that.

The hon. Lady and other hon. Members highlighted the effects of the illegal blockade and the need for the UK Government to commit to OCHA funding. Overall, it was a powerful speech. She was slightly emotional when talking about her visit to the hospital and her encounter there, which is understandable. It shows the importance of parliamentarians being able to make such visits to get first-hand understanding. I echo the call to see what can be done to allow future parliamentary visits to Gaza, which are currently denied to hon. Members. In her closing remarks, the hon. Lady said that if there was no further action, there would be blood on all our hands. That was a powerful way to end her speech.

I commend the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) for his work as chair of the Britain-Palestine all-party parliamentary group. It does fantastic work and puts on a lot of events that allow people to find out more information. I wish I did not have so many clashes when those events are on, because they always look valuable. He said that the current situation in Gaza is a nightmare—I think that is the correct word—and that it was predicted in 2012. The World Health Organisation predicted that Gaza would be uninhabitable by 2020. We have now reached that tipping point in living conditions. The hon. Gentleman also highlighted the basic fundamental human right of the right to life, which has been denied to so many people. The recent deaths underpin just how that philosophy has been eroded completely.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a good speech, summing up all the issues that face civilians in Gaza at the moment. The UN reports that 90% of Gaza's drinking water is not fit for human consumption and that 60% of the population depend on humanitarian aid. Often, issues such as purified water are missed in the grand scheme of things, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is not a fit way to live and that we must redress the situation?

Alan Brown: Yes. Other hon. Members have also made that point. I agree—this is not a way to live. It is a way to control the population, and to do so, frankly, in an inhumane way.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield highlighted Israel's past failures to have robust inquiries that get to the truth. That is why so many hon. Members are calling for international co-operation and involvement in an inquiry—there is no faith that we will get to the truth of what has happened and the scale of violence that has been perpetrated. He also correctly raised concerns about arms sales and the checks that are required on the sale of weapons from the UK to Israel, a point that other hon. Members reflected on.

The right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) made a balanced speech, although I think she sometimes came at it from the wrong perspective. She highlighted

the fact that Israel has presented a raft of infrastructure projects for the international community to fund. Frankly, that is an abdication of Israel's responsibility. Israel is the occupying force and should be supplying and funding the infrastructure, rather than asking the international community to do so. She also highlighted the possible benefits of the Palestinian Authority, rather than Hamas, regaining control of Gaza. I think we would all agree with that, but equally a change in political leadership would be a silver bullet—far more work needs to be done to end the conflict, although I agree with the philosophy that we need an end to the violence.

The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) highlighted the controls on the Gazan population: the permits issue goes back to 1991 and predates Hamas. It is important to remember that perspective and how long the situation has been building up. He highlighted issues of attacks on Gaza fishermen, as well as the fact that trade opportunities for Gaza have been completely undermined and offset by the destruction of infrastructure, including the seaports. I wholeheartedly agree with that. He also highlighted the impact and scale of the violence, with 1,300 casualties in hospital in one day. We need to remember that the hospitals are already under pressure, and that puts further pressure on hospitals and on aid budgets and exacerbates the downward spiral.

The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) is one of the few parliamentarians who have been lucky enough to visit Gaza. He discussed the observations of Human Rights Watch on the disproportionate use of violence, as well as Hamas's involvement in the protests. He also highlighted the effects of the blockade on what he called the de-development of Gaza, which I think is a fair comment, and the issue of exit permits. There is real suffering for people who need urgent healthcare; they are being denied their right to that healthcare and some are dying as a consequence. We really need to appreciate the gravity of the situation for so many of the population.

The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) highlighted the work of Breaking the Silence and the testimony of a former soldier. I too pay tribute to that organisation for its work. I have met its representatives, and it was a real eye-opener for me; its books and publications would bring tears to the eye. I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her speech, and I agree that some of the recent actions should be called war crimes. That is why we need a robust, independent inquiry. There is a general lack of hope for individuals living in Gaza, which exacerbates the current situation.

I agree with the hon. Lady's call on the need to recognise Palestine. It is time that the UK Government stepped up to the plate on that.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) has also been lucky enough to visit Gaza. He highlighted just how traumatic that visit was, which again underlines the value of parliamentarians being able to visit and see things at first hand, explain their observations to other people, get the wider population to understand, and then put pressure on the Government. He asked the Minister about the UK Government's policy on the right to return—again, it will be good to hear the ministerial response—and why the Government continue to say that this is not the time to recognise Palestine. So what are the reasons? We really need to understand them.

The final Back-Bench contribution came from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). He talked about the inquiry and used the phrase:

“Nobody should be a judge in their own cause”,

which underlines the concerns that hon. Members have about how the inquiry will go forward. He also spoke about the persecution of fishermen and was able to relate to the impact it would have on his community if there were similar persecution on the fishermen there.

I have also visited the west bank—I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—and I have seen at first hand the controls on the Palestinian population and the security walls and checkpoints. I have visited Bedouin villages where demolitions have occurred and further demolitions are continually threatened. I have seen how natural assets are misappropriated for the use of new settlements to the detriment of the indigenous population. I have visited the village of Khan al-Ahmar, where an aid-built school is constantly under the threat of demolition. That gave me a flavour of what life is like for some Palestinians, but it did not even come close to allowing me to have an understanding of what life is like in Gaza. Obviously, I will not be able to visit Gaza unless the situation changes.

The same Israeli Government tactics mean that people are hemmed in by security barriers and assets are controlled by the Israeli Government. There are fuel and power shortages, and as other hon. Members have said, water plants are unable to operate around the clock and 96% of groundwater is unfit for human consumption. The sewage treatment plants are not operating, 80% of the shoreline is polluted, and there is pressure on hospitals. It really is no wonder that Gaza is labelled an open-air prison. Just recently, the UN Human Rights Commissioner stated that 1.9 million people are imprisoned in Gaza

“from birth to death in a poisonous favela”,

which really underlines what international organisations think.

As others have said, Gaza has the highest unemployment rate in the world, estimated at 44%, and 80% for women. UNICEF estimates that nearly 80% of the population are dependent on international aid. Is it any wonder that there are protests when people live like that? Save the Children analysis has revealed that almost 8,000 people, including 700 children, have been injured in protests since 30 March. More than 250 children in Gaza have been shot with live ammunition, and we have heard that there have been approximately 60 deaths. Clearly, the recent opening of the moved US embassy in Jerusalem did nothing but inflame matters. Again, that was highlighted by the right hon. Member for East Ham.

Israeli campaigners highlight how the settlers have been removed from Gaza and that Gaza is therefore under the control of Palestinians, as though that has been a good move. However, that makes it easier for the Israeli Government to control the Gazan population. People bristle at the term “apartheid”, but if the Gazan population is completely hemmed in, is that not apartheid?

I have also visited the city of Hebron, including an area of the city that Palestinians are not allowed to enter. There are checkpoints to make sure they cannot enter. Again, that can only be apartheid. We need to understand that and not shy away from using such language.

On Thursday 17 May, the Israeli ambassador to the UK held a meeting with the Scottish Government’s External Affairs Secretary, Fiona Hyslop. She delivered a forceful message on behalf of the Scottish Government that the 50 years of Palestinian oppression, the illegal occupation of the west bank, the illegal expansion of settlements and the illegal siege of Gaza must end, and that a two-state solution must be found to bring peace in the region. The Scottish National party also supports the UN Secretary-General’s call for independent investigations to be carried out following the recent conflict—a call that has been widely backed by hon. Members in today’s debate.

We need the UK Government to step up to the plate. It was shocking that they did not vote for an independent investigation into the killings by the IDF. The UK Government have so far refused to back calls that trade with the illegal settlements should be halted. Such trade clearly gives legitimacy to the settlements, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith identified. The UK Government have also refused to demand compensation for aid-funded structures that have been demolished. They call for an easing of the blockade rather than a proper public statement that the blockade is completely illegal and should be lifted. As we have heard, they continue to sell arms to Israel, which causes concerns for hon. Members, and many of my constituents have contacted me on that matter.

Although the UK Government maintain support for a two-state solution, we seem to be further away from that than ever, and I echo the calls that other hon. Members have made: it is time for the UK Government to formally recognise Palestine if we are to move the situation forward.

The west bank is in danger of being split in two, and as we know, Gaza is already completely separated from the west bank. In practical terms, it seems almost inconceivable that two states will be created—the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) expressed that concern in an intervention.

We need to see clearer international action to resolve the Gaza situation and the wider geopolitics of Israel. I repeat my phrase: the UK Government need to step up to the plate.

3.16 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir David, as well as that of Sir Henry, who has now left the Chamber. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing the debate and on introducing it so passionately and clearly. She made it clear that the situation for 1.8 million Gazans is inhumane, and one cannot but agree. She also pointed out our Government’s weak response to the bloodshed on the Gaza border. I know the Minister will address those points in his response. My hon. Friend said that Israel has the right to defend itself, and that the role of Hamas has not helped the situation, although the UK Government’s abstention on the Human Rights Council resolution was, in her words, “disgraceful”.

My hon. Friend drew our attention to the fact that the Israeli ambassador, Mark Regev, described the Israeli response last week as “surgical”, which is appalling, especially coming from a man who is so well respected in the diplomatic community. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) intervened to reaffirm his

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

commitment to a two-state solution as the only way forward to peace, and he asked my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, to affirm hers, which she duly did, of course.

The only Conservative Member present, the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who is not in his place right now, said that the two-state solution might be becoming increasingly difficult to achieve, and asked whether it would be possible to accept a one-state solution. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, said no, and that a two-two state solution was the only way forward for peace, which is what the Labour party completely supports.

We had a further intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who pointed out the mental health crisis in Gaza as well as the physical health crisis. We often forget that mental illness can be as debilitating as physical illness or injury if not more so. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) asked about the illegal blockade of goods going into Gaza. There is no doubt that there is a massive crisis in healthcare on the Gaza strip, with no supplies of basic dressings or medication, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, pointed out. There are serious water shortages, increasing pollution of that water, and diminishing water tables. My hon. Friend said that action by the United Kingdom and the international community would help to diminish the ability of Hamas to recruit, and she is absolutely correct.

We next heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), whose record on standing up for the rights of Palestinians is as exemplary as it is long. I have known him for more than 40 years, and even as a student he was a champion of the rights and cause of Palestine. I remember clearly the poster on his student room wall: a reproduction of an airmail letter that said “Palestine: return to sender—no such address.” He asked for the UK Government’s view of the United Nations Human Rights Council decision, now that the commission of inquiry has been set up. My hon. Friend also talked about B’Tselem, the Israeli human rights organisation, which I am also familiar with, and which has serious concerns about Israel conducting its own inquiry and about how independent that will be. He questioned the use of UK-supplied equipment against protesters, but was encouraged by the Government’s response to questions about humanitarian relief in Gaza. I know that the Minister will deal with his questions.

I thought that the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) was positive, because although she talked about the toxic cocktail of hopelessness and despair in Gaza, which must be tackled, she put forward some of the ideas that are being discussed in Israel, and mentioned the Labour leader, Avi Gabbay, whom I had the pleasure of meeting when the shadow Foreign Secretary—my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry)—and I were in Israel and the occupied territories six months ago. Avi Gabbay has suggested economic aid from Israel and its Arab neighbours, which could be extremely positive but is of course being thwarted by the appalling Government of Binyamin Netanyahu. The idea of a sea port is such an obvious one.

It could solve not just the economic problems of Gaza but the security issues. Why can that not be created, if not by Israel then by her Arab neighbours and the international community, supported by the United Kingdom?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North also said that of course Palestinian Authority control of Gaza must be reinstated. One can only agree with that sentiment; it would be good—although, of course, as other hon. Members have pointed out, Hamas was actually elected in the last elections to be held, which were more than 10 years ago. My hon. Friend also commended Egypt for its efforts. She said that the root of Gaza’s problems lies in the brutal rule of Hamas there, and there is no doubt about that.

My hon. Friend mentioned the kibbutz of Nir Oz, which I had the privilege of visiting in November with the shadow Foreign Secretary. I was struck not only by its nearness to Khan Yunis across the Gaza strip—you could see it from the kibbutz—but by the stories that we were told about mortar bomb attacks and shelling from Gaza, and the lack of anger from Nir Oz residents. Of course they were upset and did not want to live under gunfire and shelling—and people in a nearby kibbutz had been killed by shelling. However, one resident told me he could understand the anger and frustration of Gazans, and why they were so angry that they wanted to attack anyone in Israel. He said something had to be done to relieve the appalling plight of those living in Gaza, and to allow them to live as the residents of Nir Oz could live. That was extraordinary, because there was no anger, or desire to kill Gazans or react to the shelling or violence. There was simply a view that it would be possible to live in peace if the circumstances were right and the Government did something more positive.

My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) has left his place, but he has a strong record of standing up for the cause of the Palestinian people. He talked about the Gaza blockade having begun long before Hamas gained power in the Gaza strip, and said Gaza was a vast open prison, hermetically sealed by Egypt and Israel. He said that there had not been a single rocket fired from Gaza in the past two months—but of course that rather covers up the fact that there have been many rockets in the past 10 years.

It was 10 years ago, in fact, that I had the privilege of visiting Gaza, when it was still possible for parliamentarians to go there, and I was struck by the appalling damage that Operation Cast Lead had done—supposedly striking individual buildings without damaging hospitals, although that was actually far from the case. We saw damage to residential blocks and two medical facilities, and the way in which food aid has to be handed out in an area that is very fertile. If they were allowed to, people there could grow their own food quite easily. That was being stopped by the political situation. We also saw damage to the British war cemetery, which is carefully managed by Gazans and kept as it should be. My hon. Friend condemned, as we all do, the use of live ammunition, which should be a last resort but of course was used to pick off demonstrators, whether they were attacking the fence or running away from it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) is another colleague and friend who has always stood up for peace and the rights of the

Palestinian people. He mentioned the concern of his constituents, from whom he has had 800 messages since Monday. I have had a few, but not quite that many. He quoted Human Rights Watch's description of Israel's response as "disproportionate and illegal"—a theme echoed by almost every speaker this afternoon. He also mentioned the culpability of Hamas. Human Rights Watch has said that it has certainly supported protests, and that criticism of Hamas can be met with arrest and torture. My hon. Friend mentioned high unemployment, which must be a contributory factor in people's anger and frustration, living in that prison. He also mentioned the plummeting water quality.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) made a passionate, emotional and extremely articulate speech. She always speaks very well. She said that Monday 14 May was a dark day in Jerusalem, with the US embassy opening to great celebration and fanfare, while 60 protesters had died from live fire in Gaza an hour down the coast. She condemned Hamas and the waving of swastikas, the spreading of lies, and the manipulation of protestors, but she noted that the response of the Israeli Government was disproportionate—that word again. She quoted an Israeli commentator saying that Gaza is a war zone and shooting to kill is justifiable in the circumstances. That is shocking and appalling.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) was with me and the shadow Foreign Secretary in November in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. He has long been a champion of the cause of the Palestinian people. He spoke of the devastation caused by Israel during three wars in Gaza, in which more than 5,000 people died, mostly civilians and children. We have seen clearly on the news the death, destruction, injuries and terrible bloodshed caused by the Israel Defence Forces shooting directly at protestors on the grounds that they were terrorists, and were all Hamas members. If we do not believe most of Hamas's propaganda, why do we believe the statement that virtually all the protesters killed were Hamas members? I do not believe a word of that, either, frankly.

The majority of injuries in recent unrest were caused by live fire, but as my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary pointed out in column 139 of *Hansard* when asking an urgent question on 15 May, those live fire rounds are designed to destroy every organ of the human body, or of any organism or creature that might have the misfortune to be hit by one of those bullets. Why do the IDF use such lethal rounds, when clearly non-lethal crowd-control means could have been used at the Gaza border to repel those trying to break the fence?

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith pointed out the deliberate targeting of 38 ambulances, which were damaged by the IDF. Medical relief facilities were also deliberately targeted. I saw that for myself when I was there 10 years ago with other members of the Foreign Affairs Committee. My hon. Friend talked about recognition of the state of Palestine, as did many other hon. Members. That is Labour party policy; if elected, Labour will recognise the state of Palestine immediately. I wish that the Israeli Government would do the same. It would go a long way towards a two-state peaceful solution in the region. My question to the Minister is why the Government do not recognise Palestine right now. If not now, when?

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith said something else very important. This debate is often polarised; people on either side are unable to see both sides at the same time, even if they have a very strong view of violence, bloodshed, cruelty and the appalling way in which people treat each other. He said something important: "There is so much to admire about the state of Israel"—I repeat, "so much to admire". I passionately agree with that. I wanted to repeat it because he is rightly known for championing the cause of the Palestinian people, but he says something like that about Israel. He also said that Gaza is a stain on Israel, and I cannot but agree with that, too.

Finally, we heard from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). I have heard him speak twice in 24 hours—yesterday it was on the subject of Qatar and UK relations with it. He always speaks with great clarity, and he is a very accomplished Member of this House. He concurred with everything that had been said this afternoon. He, too, was very concerned about the United Kingdom's abstention last week on the issue of an inquiry by the Human Rights Council. He, too, said something important, which was that, as we all know, the United Kingdom has "a substantial voice on the world's stage", but it is not being heard on the violence in Gaza. What more can we do to ensure that it is?

To be clear, in such a critical but apparently intractable situation, it is more incumbent than ever on the global community, and not just the United Kingdom Government, to act to safeguard the health and wellbeing of the residents of Gaza. It is therefore too appalling for words that the Trump Administration have chosen this critical moment to halve their funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, as so many have mentioned this afternoon.

For almost 70 years, UNRWA has helped hundreds of thousands of Gaza residents and millions more Palestinians across the region with their essential humanitarian needs. Its budget last year was \$760 million and, as a direct result of its work, tens of thousands of children in Gaza received schooling, and tens of thousands of their parents received healthcare that would otherwise not be available to them. Goodness knows that if it was not available, there would be nothing whatever.

This year, however, UNRWA must deal with the fact that Donald Trump has cut its funding by \$65 million, because—I quote his tweet—

"we pay the Palestinians HUNDRED OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS a year and get no appreciation or respect".

In January in Davos he went further, saying that the money had been cut as a direct result of the Palestinian authorities' refusal to meet Mike Pence, and that he considered the money to be "on the table" now, as a negotiating chip to force the Palestinians to accept the mythical US peace plan. So young children in Gaza are being denied education and medicine, until the Palestinian authorities start showing Donald Trump some "appreciation or respect". If it was not so cruel, it would be laughable.

Other countries, including most recently Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have tried to plug the gap in UNRWA's funding, but when all they can offer are one-off contributions rather than annual additions, the funding crisis is only delayed rather than stopped. That is why we have called on the Government to take the lead on a longer-term solution, by initiating a

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

special global funding conference, such as those held in response to humanitarian emergencies, the difference in this case being that we must not wait for the emergency to strike before acting—it has already struck and is present every single day.

My fear, however, is that the Government are unwilling to act—though I hope they are not. Why? Because their friend President Trump will say: “What are you doing? I’m punishing them, and you’re letting them off the hook. I’m trying to blackmail them into accepting my peace plan, and you’re removing my leverage.” If that is the argument, however, I respectfully say to the Minister that they should not just differ in private; the Government must have the courage to differ in public, and to tell President Trump that he is wrong.

This is no time for passivity. As we have heard throughout the debate, Gaza cannot afford to wait. There is a massive opportunity for someone to step into the global leadership gap that Donald Trump’s America has left in Palestine. I urge the British Government to listen to what they have heard today, and urgently fill that gap.

3.34 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, as it was to serve under Sir Henry’s earlier.

With the rare luxury of a little extra time to respond to the debate, I shall do my best to do so. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing it, and I thank her for speaking as ably as she did. I also thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for his excellent summary of the debate so far. We have become a bit of a double act, in which the hon. Gentleman does that—he does it so well—and I then do not have to spend half of the 10 minutes that I normally get to respond to a debate covering it, which means that I am left with the time that I need. In this case the time did not matter, and as he went through the debate he stole a number of my best lines—I would have drawn attention to a number of the same things as he did.

Before I turn to the script and before my officials worry too much, let me say a little off script and respond in the tone that has been used in the debate, because that is important. First and foremost, I would like anyone interested in the subject to read this debate. I do not agree with every word that has been said—I can make that clear without picking out the individual points in question, although people may understand which they are, and I shall cover quite a lot of them in my response—but I want to say this: I know well most of the Members who spoke, and I have known many of them for a number of years. They are not in this Chamber last thing on a Thursday afternoon just before the recess as a mouthpiece for anything; they are here because they care about this issue and have cared about it for as long as I have. They understand the complexities.

As the hon. Member for Leeds North East pointed out, quite a number of colleagues who have strong positions, particularly in support of Palestinians, made very strong remarks about Hamas, and about recognising the good things in Israel. Those points are not always heard. As I have mentioned before, for instance in responding to the urgent question this week, the issue

has become incredibly binary. I know what Members who have spoken in the debate will get on Twitter and Facebook tonight, because I get it as well. There is no acceptance on one side or the other of anything that remotely reflects the complexities and difficulties that have to be faced. All hon. Members who have spoken will receive something tonight from someone who will be bitter and abusive about something said in the debate that they have picked up on one way or the other. Anyone who cares to read the debate and wants to go down that line, however, should know the sort of Member involved—they are people who care about all this.

The right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) was in a relatively lonely position in putting her case today, but she mentioned things that needed to be said, and other hon. Members picked up on them. The little bit of extra time enabled colleagues to go a little wider in their remarks than usual, which I feel was necessary in the circumstances. We have to deal with the specifics of what happened recently and the specifics of the Gaza humanitarian crisis, but we cannot do that without understanding the wider issue.

Let me pick out a couple of other points made in the debate. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and I spoke together in the holocaust debate not long ago; we spoke about Auschwitz. I understand the deep feelings that she has about both sides of this issue. She spoke about hope and the absence of hope, and for me that lies at the heart of everything. I have campaigned for years for an end to all this, as colleagues know. Responsibility for the failure to find the answer to the middle east peace process is shared by so many. We can point to no one group and say, “They, and they alone, are responsible.” But the collective failure over years has left people wondering where their hope will come from.

On my last visit to the west bank, I talked to the Palestinian leadership. After years of working on the basis of going for statehood, the concern is what their process will be if that does not happen. Who do they talk to then? How do we move forward? In Gaza, the hopelessness caused by a combination of governance by Hamas and the pressures put upon the area from Israel has left a miserable situation where so many people are dependent on humanitarian access—the smell of the sea and all that sort of thing.

There are things we do not talk a lot about. We do not much talk about the difficulties and failures of Palestinian political reconciliation, or the lack of democratic accountability. We do not talk much about incitement to terror and the commemoration of those who have committed acts of quite serious atrocity on others. That is because we cannot cover everything, but it is also a part of the mindset that has led to this binary situation where neither one side nor the other can move.

Israel sees everything in Gaza as a potential security threat. To respond to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), it sees the waters as a place from which attacks can be launched—because they were. It sees approaches to the border fence as a potential for attack—because they were. There is a strong sense from those in leadership in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem that security therefore trumps everything else.

Of course, there is a point beyond which it cannot go. I have made the point on behalf of the Government that defence and security are about more than just

having more weapons than your opponent. Ultimately, the security that we need is provided because of the relationship we have with our friends and neighbours. That is not in place in the circumstances we are discussing. Those are the fundamentals of the issue.

Rather than digress further, I will come to some of the main points and perhaps to some questions that were asked. That context is really important, because when this House discusses this issue, there is a shortage of time and we just have sharp questions, and people can get the view that we are part of the binary discussion and that colleagues have narrow views. They do not; they understand the situation, and I am appreciative of being able to respond.

The situation in Gaza is deeply troubling. The loss of life and injuries through violence at the border are tragic. I am grateful to Members for their concern and for the many excellent suggestions made today about how international partners might alleviate the situation. Both sides must urgently prioritise steps to resolve the situation in Gaza. We must not let those events reinforce violence further, but we ensure that, at last, they signal a new time for leadership, negotiation and peace, because we should not go through this again.

We have been in close contact with international partners to monitor the humanitarian situation in Gaza. In relation to the immediate issue, I am in urgent consultation with the International Committee of the Red Cross to support its appeal. A contribution to the appeal will address urgent needs in Gaza's health system. Some 11 hospitals need support to cope with increased need for surgery, through the provision of materials including surgical equipment, drugs and disposables, wound-dressing kits and assistive devices.

The ICRC appeal will also help in the evacuation of patients requiring medical care that is not available in Gaza and physical rehabilitation services for some 4,000 persons with physical disabilities. It will provide fuel and spare parts so that the 11 hospitals can keep functioning. I am in urgent contact with the ICRC about what we can do to support that.

We are all aware of the situation, but I want to say a little more about what we are trying to do. The UK has supported up to 1 million people by addressing critical water and sanitation needs through UNICEF. In answer to the question raised by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley, the UNICEF grant was only ever intended to be short-term; we provide a long-term contribution through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which will continue. Clearly, events at the moment may allow for further support. That depends on the steps that are taken in relation to Gaza, as raised by special envoy Nikolai Mladenov last week. I will speak about that later. Because the situation is moving and getting worse, the UK has the opportunity to provide further support. Right hon. and hon. Members should not assume that just because announcements have already been made, that is it. It depends on other things, and we may well come back to the issue.

UK aid to the occupied territories provides essential health and education services, helps to build strong state institutions, promotes economic prosperity and supports the most vulnerable, including refugees. In 2016-17, UK support to the Palestinian Authority enabled around 24,000 young Palestinians to get an education and provided up to 3,700 immunisations for children

and about 185,000 medical consultations. We take our humanitarian responsibilities very seriously and we do what we can, but nothing disguises the fact that, ultimately, we do not want to do any of that because we want to see a different situation in Gaza.

On the political front, it is vital that all parties urgently work together to unblock the barriers to medical care and access in Gaza. Besides providing impartial humanitarian funding, it is incumbent on all parties to redouble political efforts to realise a two-state solution, to ensure justice and for both Palestinians and Israelis, as so many colleagues have spoken of today. As right hon. and hon. Members rightly understand, the UK's long-standing position is that a negotiated two-state solution is needed, with Jerusalem as the shared capital.

Before I get into further areas where we may not agree with one another, let me touch on the recognition of the state of Palestine. The UK keeps that possibility very flexible, because we can never know the most appropriate time to do it. The time is not now. It is easy to say that we are always waiting for something else, but the possibility of the United States' envoys coming up with their proposals provides a target for all of us at the moment to make progress in the middle east peace process.

The recognition of the state of Palestine would be an important issue and a symbolic gesture for the United Kingdom, but it is important for it to be more than symbolic—it must go along with other steps taken by the Palestinian leadership and by the state of Israel to cement Palestine's position. Otherwise, I say in fairness to all colleagues present that it could just be accepted, forgotten and moved on from, and that could become a further barrier for those who are looking for states to take one side or the other.

We all know what the reaction has been to the United States' decision on Jerusalem. The Palestinian Authority said, "Well, that's it. The Americans have changed their position. It is clear that they cannot be an honest broker. They have made this decision." I am not willing, and I do not think the Government are willing, to risk the possibility of such an important step as the recognition of the state of Palestine, which we want to take, being seen in such a way. That is why it is important to make it clear that the decision can be made, and that it is not dependent on anyone's veto or on any set of circumstances beyond those that we think will be most conducive to peace. At the moment, the distance between the parties is so wide that it would not be the most effective use of such an important step, but the United Kingdom keeps it under active consideration. That is where we are with that.

Louise Haigh: I assume the Minister is not equating the US's decision to move its embassy with the UK's potential decision to recognise the state of Palestine. Does he accept that Palestine feels abandoned by the international community and by a country that, wrongly, it felt it could rely on for support? It would be more than purely symbolic for the UK to come forward and recognise the state now; it would be an important move to rebuild the peace process.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady is right that I am not equating the two at all. The United Kingdom opposed the United States' decision to move its embassy because we were concerned, first, that it broke an international convention and a UN resolution on the status of Jerusalem

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and, secondly, that it indicated a move by the United States that made its position more difficult as an important interlocutor in this difficult situation. That is my point—the reaction to it made that more difficult. The two are not comparable, and of course the UK could recognise the state of Palestine at any time. Sadly, unless that were grounded in something meaningful for the process, it might be just symbolic, and is very important that it should not be. I fully accept that recognition is the Opposition's policy. It is not ours, for the reason I have given. We will not change that this afternoon, but we still want—and will be able—to use recognition at the time when we think it is most effective. That remains our policy.

The situation in Gaza is complex, and the actions of non-state actors such as Hamas make the situation extremely difficult. We recognise Israel's legitimate security concerns and urge Hamas to renounce violence and move towards the Quartet principles long needed for peace. I did not hear any suggestion to the contrary from any colleague who spoke, whatever their position. We reiterate our support for the Egyptian-led reconciliation process and the return of the Palestinian Authority to full administration of the Gaza strip, because that causes practical issues in Gaza. That is as important as a number of the other things we have spoken about.

The UK continues fully to support the need for an independent investigation into the Gaza protests and the response to them, as I have made clear. I will go into a little more detail about that to answer colleagues' questions, and I am happy to take further questions. We are concerned about the high number of deaths and casualties, and about the volume of live fire used. The Foreign Secretary, the Human Rights Minister and I have raised the issue of force with Israeli authorities. The Foreign Secretary spoke to President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu on 16 May and encouraged them to call for calm and work to de-escalate the situation. I spoke to the Israeli ambassador to the UK on 17 May and to Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Hotovely on 13 May, urging restraint and a reduction in the use of live fire.

There is a need to establish the facts, including why such a volume of live fire has been used and the role that Hamas has played. That is why we support an independent and transparent investigation. Everyone has seen different things—clearly, there are questions to answer on both sides about how this came about, and colleagues raised a number of them.

On the independent investigation, during the UN Human Rights Council session last Friday we abstained on calls for a commission of inquiry into recent violence. The substance of the resolution was not impartial and balanced. We could not support an investigation that refused explicitly to examine the action of non-state actors such as Hamas. I listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley said, and her reading of the resolution is the same as mine, but it is notable that the Human Rights Council in particular loses no opportunity to name Israel—it does so on every single occasion, including in the notorious item 7. It would not have been difficult to name Hamas, but the council does not and will not. The possibility of the council conducting an inquiry that has acceptance where it needs acceptance is genuinely limited.

We continue fully to support the need for an independent and transparent investigation into recent events. We call directly on Israel to carry out a transparent inquiry into the IDF's conduct at the border fence, and to demonstrate how it will achieve a sufficient level of independence. We believe that investigation should include international members, and we urge that its findings be made public and, if wrongdoing is found, those responsible be held to account. We joined European allies—Germany, Slovakia, Hungary and Croatia—in our position. I understand why we have been picked out, but 14 states in all said, "Look, this isn't the right way to go." We regret that the substance of the resolution was as it was, but what is important now is that the inquiry that states want to see is carried out.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and others asked, "Why should Israel do this?" Israel should do this because the first responsibility for such an incident usually lies with the state party itself, as has happened with inquiries in the United Kingdom. I made the point in the House—I think others have made it, too—that the reality is that if the Israeli authorities did this alone, they would be very unlikely to convince international parties. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) made reference to a court case just the other day, where the Israeli Supreme Court will hold against the Israeli Government. So Israel does have a structure, an investigative system and the rule of law, but in circumstances such as these it is difficult to imagine that, without some independent element, people who have seen what they have seen on the television and in film will feel there has been an adequate response.

It is essential that all aspects are covered. There are real issues about being able to investigate in Gaza and to talk to those connected with Hamas to see what might be revealed. Again, we cannot gloss over that. The hon. Member for Leeds North East made the point that Hamas claimed that a number of its "operatives" were involved. That may well be the case—we do not know. Hamas is under a lot of pressure in Gaza for what happened. Many people in Gaza are deeply distressed by the event and feel they might in some way have been used in all this. Hamas may have its own reasons for putting forward the claim that many of its operatives were involved. I do not know the answer to that question—none of us does. It is important to ensure that the investigation can cover both sides, but the need for Israel, in the first place, to accept a degree of responsibility for examining what happened and to recognise that an independent element will bolster the international community's confidence in such an inquiry seems to me to be self-evident and very important.

Louise Haigh: Can I just seek some clarification? Do the Government not support the Human Rights Council undertaking an independent investigation, because of some of the concerns the Minister has just outlined, or do they not support the resolution that was drafted by the Human Rights Council? If it is the latter, will the Government work with the other countries that abstained, which he mentioned, to draft a new resolution and ensure that a truly independent investigation can go forward?

Alistair Burt: Our concern was about the resolution itself. We worked with other parties to see whether we could get a resolution that would be acceptable. I genuinely

do not know whether it is possible to reopen that, because a decision seems to have been taken. If people were going to change the resolution, it would have been changed at the time.

Let me say this about what is happening now. The UK is not required formally to take any further action or position on the HRC-mandated inquiry until the final report is published, but as supporters of commissions of inquiry in general, we will encourage parties to engage constructively with the HRC and its mechanisms. At the same time, we will work to ensure that the commission of inquiry is as independent, transparent and balanced as possible in its approach.

Rachael Maskell: I really appreciate the Minister's giving way on this point. We are in a really imperfect situation, and I think we all recognise that it will be impossible for all parties to have complete buy-in to any investigation. However, the investigation that is on the table is the closest we can currently get to an independent investigation into this dreadful situation, so surely we should give it more support. Although Israel can carry out its own investigation and that, too, should be considered at its conclusion, this independent investigation certainly requires the UK's support at this time.

Alistair Burt: Well, I have said what I have said. We will encourage parties to engage, but we did not support the resolution, for the reasons I have given. As I said, the HRC's relationship with Israel over the years makes it difficult for it to claim to be an independent sponsor. I understand that other nations do not see it that way, but if we want to get to the bottom of this situation, as in any inquiry, we need as much buy-in from as many of the parties as possible. If we know right from the beginning that we will not get that, it will be a false trail in the first place. As the hon. Lady says, there is nothing else there at present. Presumably, that is why the HRC has taken the line that it has taken. We disagree with it, but rather than leave it completely, we want to do exactly as we have indicated.

We have taken this issue directly to the Israeli authorities—that was one of the questions raised—and we will continue to do so. We will wait to see what the response is and what Israel has planned. I would be extremely surprised if Israel did not want to take matters forward in some way, but we will need to make those judgments as they come along. However, just because something imperfect is the only thing in town, that is no reason necessarily to back it if it will not work practically. That is why we have taken the view on the inquiry that we have.

Let me turn to Gaza. The restrictions imposed on movement and access to Gaza contribute significantly to the pressures that the Gazan people face. One of the questions asked by the hon. Member for Hammersmith was about what I thought about the demonstrations. I can only go off what we have—the diplomatic intelligence and everything that we get—and my sense is that it is a combination of those factors that colleagues have brought out. There is an inevitable frustration in Gaza, typified by so many of those comments, but there is a practical and realistic recognition of the politics of the situation and the dreadful combination of what happened last week, together with other events taking place elsewhere.

Colleagues have already spoken of the political incitement that was given during that time. My sense is that it is a terrible mixture of those things, and ultimately the only

resolution of that is to take away all the seeds of such frustration. That can be done only with developments in Gaza as a first and urgent step, followed by the political process.

Stephen Timms: I appreciate the thoughtful way in which the Minister is answering the debate. I do not think he has yet addressed the question I asked about the United Nations Occupied Palestinian Territories humanitarian fund, which was supported by the British Government last year. Will he give us some hope that the Government will support that fund this year as well?

Alistair Burt: As I said to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley, we responded to an appeal in relation to Gaza at the end of last year—I think that was with £1.9 million. We have no current plans to do so, but we are reviewing all our possibilities in support of Gaza. I indicated what we are doing at this moment in relation to the ICRC. Just because nothing is immediately on the table, that does not mean that it will not happen. I will go on to talk about what we hope to do in Gaza and open that up a little.

We note Israel's recent efforts to ensure the delivery of goods to Gaza, despite the serious damage done at the Kerem Shalom crossing by protestors during recent weeks. We will continue to work hard with Israel for an increase in the entry of goods to Gaza to stimulate economic activity.

The Gazan health sector is of course under immense strain. As I mentioned earlier, medical facilities are already stretched by the long-standing shortages of medical, electricity and fuel supplies. Delays in approvals for medical referrals and difficulty in reaching facilities mean that people have to wait a long time for medical treatment. Do we make representations on that? Yes, we do. Like other colleagues here, I find it difficult to see how cancer patients can be any risk to those looking after border controls and the like. We do indeed make representations where we can on that. While we always recognise that there are those who will seek to exploit anything, we would want to see the discretion that we would expect, which is used by Israel in a number of cases, extended to all those genuine medical cases.

The tragic events during the recent protests at the Gaza border have exacerbated the chronic strain on the health system. Emergency services are overwhelmed and overstretched, and the WHO is calling for essential drugs, medical disposables and medical kits for surgery and trauma. The ICRC recently stated that the health system is close to collapse, which is why we are in urgent consultation with it at this moment.

We welcome the decision by the Palestinian Authority to provide critical medical supplies and doctors to Gaza. There is also a desperate ongoing need for access to clean water. As I mentioned earlier, the UK is supporting approximately 1 million Gazans through support to UNICEF's work to provide clean water and rehabilitate sanitation facilities, helping to stop the spread of disease.

We are also a long-term supporter of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees, which provides basic health and education services to 1.3 million people in Gaza, as well as over 800,000 refugees in the west bank. The United States is responsible for its own policy, but the UK will deliver its next round of financial support earlier than originally planned to help meet the

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growing needs of Palestinian refugees across the region. We remain keen to support UNRWA in its work. We are one of the top five UNRWA donors, and we remain keen to ensure that all donor partners recognise the part it plays, and to help and assist in dealing with any queries or concerns that others may have.

News of Egypt opening the Rafah crossing for Ramadan is encouraging, and we urge Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority to work together to find a resolution to the situation in Gaza. The UK will continue to work with the UN special representative of the Secretary-General to facilitate that.

In connection with that, Nikolai Mladenov, the special representative, presented to the UN Security Council yesterday and addressed the situation in Gaza. He brought forward commitments, including on the need to advance urgent infrastructure and economic development projects, to improve access and movement, and to support the Egyptian-led reconciliation process. In particular, he spoke about his aim to fast-track the delivery of priority projects agreed over the past two years by the ad hoc liaison committee, such as the Gaza central desalination programme, the implementation of the Red sea-Dead sea agreement to provide clean water to Gaza, support on sewage treatment, and the 161 line for better electricity supply. As he noted, failure to implement during the next six to 12 months some of the achievable projects already approved by the relevant stakeholders would amplify the humanitarian crisis.

We stand ready to support the areas of work that Mr Mladenov and the UN have identified. We also support him in an engagement and co-ordination role, working with the Palestinian Authority, Israel and Egypt to overcome any political, administrative and logistical blockages that may emerge. That work will help to improve the humanitarian situation, stimulate economic activity and ensure a long-term future for Gaza.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) asked about the Quartet proposals. I met John Clarke, the economic director of the Quartet, about two weeks ago, when we discussed some of the ongoing work, and I indicated the United Kingdom's support. We are planning to upscale our support for the economic development of Gaza in order to increase trade and job creation, enable greater movement and access for people and goods, and enhance the supply of electricity and water.

Mr Carmichael: The point I must put to the Minister is not directly relevant to Gaza but has a bearing on the current climate there. As we have debated, the Israeli High Court has handed down the judgment of Justice Solberg, rejecting a petition against the demolition of the community and school at Khan al-Ahmar, a Bedouin community of 100 souls on the west bank. Obviously, that entitles the state to demolish the community, but it does not require it. Is this not an opportunity for the Israeli Government, as the occupying force in the west bank, to demonstrate a bit of good will, which might ease the tensions elsewhere in Palestine?

Alistair Burt: I endorse the right hon. Gentleman's comments. I have been to Khan al-Ahmar, as colleagues know, and as a number of colleagues have. We disagree with the possible demolition. We will continue to make

representations to Israel on our sense of the damage to the community, and because this is something that would demonstrate renewed commitment to resolving issues by looking to find a pathway forward together, rather than taking action that might be legally possible but not seemingly appropriate. The UK maintains its position on demolitions and settlements as set out before.

Andy Slaughter: I do not know when the Minister was last in Gaza or if he plans to go again—I know that successive consul-generals from Jerusalem go there regularly—but will he or his Department make representations to the Government of Israel that Back-Bench Members of Parliament from any party should be allowed to travel to Gaza?

Alistair Burt: Yes, we will. Ultimately, it is a decision for the state of Israel to take, even in relation to my trips. If I seek to go, they have to be sure of the circumstances and everything else. I would not want to take that away, but I always feel that contact is vital, helpful and necessary, and of course I would encourage it.

The UK is committed to addressing the underlying cause of humanitarian strife in Gaza—it is so pertinent to what we have been discussing—by increasing our support for economic development. The Palestinian economy is not growing at the rate needed to create the necessary jobs for a growing labour force or to improve living standards. As a result, unemployment continues to rise. Israeli constraints on movement, access and trade are the key impediments to economic growth.

In Gaza, that is compounded by the dire water and energy situation. Issues over power and energy remain. As colleagues have said, Gazans currently have access to only four hours of electricity per day. Our support will help to lift the overall standard of living by increasing trade and job creation, enabling greater movement and access for people, and enhancing the supply of electricity and clean water.

There is a glimmer of positivity through the work that the special envoy, whom I spoke to last week, is moving forward in an otherwise difficult time. We will continue to channel our support to that work, in addition to diplomatic efforts. We are keen to focus on areas where there is Israeli-Palestinian co-operation, of which there is much more than I think some people outside this place would necessarily recognise, and to support the financial sustainability of the Palestinian Authority.

As I have the time, let me deal with one or two of the specific questions raised. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland asked about Omar Shakir. We are obviously aware of the case but, as I said in the House the other day, ultimately it is a matter for the Israeli Government. We have been in touch with Human Rights Watch about the case. Officials from the embassy in Tel Aviv have also raised the gentleman's case with the Israeli authorities, and did so two days ago.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield, who I think knows more about the subject than I do after all the long years he has spent on it, spoke about increasing funding to UNRWA, and I have already mentioned that. He spoke about the recent conference in Washington, which a UK senior official attended. We discussed projects to help to transform Gaza, and we will continue to support those efforts and US leadership. US engagement is vital, of course, to help to encourage and support

Israel in its work on that. In view of the fact that we might not get movement on the middle east peace process as quickly as we would like, Gaza is something that could be done more quickly, and because it is urgent, putting some emphasis into that is the right thing to do. He also mentioned MPs visiting Gaza, and I have answered that point.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley spoke about both mental health and UNICEF. I answered the question about UNICEF, but the situation is such that we are reviewing what support we can give, particularly looking forward to the projects in Gaza that I mentioned. On mental health, our support to UNRWA helps to support mental health services. All our experience of seeing trauma in many places around the world leads us to recognise that the damage done to people by being part of this situation, and particularly the damage done to children by what they may have witnessed, requires that attention is given to mental health services.

I have detained the House for far too long. I am grateful for the opportunity to have been able to say a little more than in the rushed five minutes I usually get at the end of a debate. As I said earlier, I know that all colleagues who have taken part in the debate care about this issue very deeply. I know also that there are often things that the House would like the UK Government to do that we cannot do, but there are positions that we believe are the right way to try to move forward, and we will continue to press those. We remain absolutely convinced both of the need to recognise Israel's existence and its needs for defence and security and of the legitimate right to justice of the Palestinians.

We recognise that the windows that we have all been looking for are closing very quickly. If not two-state, what? If we are not now to move forward, when? We will continue to press that. I hope and believe that the balanced position we seek to take, recognising the complexities, and having this debate read in many different capitals around the place will enable states and friends of both Israel and the Palestinians to recognise Parliament's desire for peace, its understanding of the complexities

of the situation, and its determination to recognise that the humanitarian situation of those affected has now reached such a state that there must be an even greater degree of urgency than before.

This is something that cannot be left or managed or that will disappear of its own accord. Hopefully, the sort of determination and comments that colleagues have expressed today will make a difference, and the United Kingdom will be able, in time, to be part of a process that will deliver what so many colleagues in this House desperately want to see.

4.14 pm

Louise Haigh: I thank you, Sir David, the Minister, the shadow Minister, the Scottish National party spokesperson and all hon. Members for participating in the debate today—the last thing before recess. I know many hon. Members will have cancelled constituency arrangements to be here—it delayed my trip to Benidorm for my cousin's hen do by a day, so I did not really mind being here so much.

I thank the Minister for his, as ever, thoughtful response. I welcome the Government's commitment to early funding of UNRWA and their support for and involvement with the parties in the independent investigation. I also welcome the Minister's commitment that he will review humanitarian support. May I say, though, that it is the case not that the Government cannot do more but that they will not do more? It is now desperately urgent for the Government to step up and take more action—to exercise our unique responsibility in this conflict, to fill the vacuum America has left behind and to secure a future for the people of Gaza.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

4.16 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 24 May 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Competitiveness Council

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): The Competitiveness Council will take place on 28 and 29 May in Brussels.

Day one—internal market and industry

The Council will receive a presentation from the Commission on the “competitiveness check-up” examining linkages between the internal market and industrial competitiveness from a sectoral perspective. The Council will discuss the regulation on mutual recognition (part of the “goods package”) with the presidency hoping to reach a general approach. The Council will also hold a policy debate on the regulation on platform to business relations.

Under AOB the Commission will provide information on recent initiatives in the digital single market, the copyright package, the new deal for consumers package, the company law package, supplementary protection certificates for medicinal products and the supplementary protection certificate for medicinal products. The Commission will also provide information on the outcome of initiatives and conferences in the field of tourism and provide an update on the current state of play on the unitary patent and Unified Patent Court.

Day one will conclude with information from the Austrian delegation on their incoming presidency work programme.

Day two—space and research

Day two of the Competitiveness Council will start with a policy debate on the future of European space policy.

The research sessions will begin with a progress report on the regulation on establishing the European high performance computing joint undertaking. The Council will then adopt Council conclusions on accelerating knowledge circulation in the European Union and conclusions on the European open science cloud.

During the afternoon session the Council is expected to agree on the regulation on the regulation on the research and training programme of the European atomic energy community (2019-20). This will be followed by a policy debate on research and innovation within the context of the next multiannual financial framework.

Under AOB, the Commission will provide information on the outcome of the presidency event dedicated to space (held in Sofia on 17 to 19 April 2018).

Day two will conclude with information from the Austrian delegation on their incoming presidency work programme.

[HCWS717]

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 25 May 2018. EU Finance Ministers will discuss the following:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 24 May meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU.

Banking package

The Council will be invited to agree a general approach to the banking risk reduction package including proposals for legislative amendments to the capital requirements regulation (CRR) and directive (CRD), single resolution mechanism regulation (SRMR), and the bank recovery and resolution directive (BRRD).

Strengthening administrative co-operation

The Council will be invited to agree a general approach to strengthen administrative co-operation in the area of VAT.

General reverse charge mechanism

The Council will be invited to agree a general approach on the VAT general reverse charge mechanism.

E-publications

The Council will be invited to agree a general approach on reduced rates for VAT e-publications.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Bulgarian presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

European semester

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on the in-depth reviews of macroeconomic imbalances in member states as part of the macroeconomic imbalances procedure, and the implementation of 2017 country-specific recommendations as assessed in the Commission’s country reports, published on 7 March.

2018 ageing report

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on the 2018 ageing report on age-related spending and the sustainability of public finances.

[HCWS718]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine TB

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I wish to update the House on the Government’s strategy to eradicate bovine TB (bTB) in England by 2038. The measures I am announcing today will help to strengthen disease control and expand our options to tackle new outbreaks of bTB.

Following the recent consultation on the principle of allowing badger control in the low risk area (LRA) of England, I am announcing my intention to enable badger control measures in the LRA in the rare event that disease in badgers is linked with infected herds. This will allow any such outbreaks to be tackled rapidly to prevent bTB from spreading further within the wildlife and cattle populations. It will also help preserve the LRA's low incidence status.

Badger control in the LRA is expected to be permitted only in very exceptional circumstances where veterinary epidemiologists judge an area to meet the published criteria for a bTB "hotspot". Any decision on whether to implement badger control in a specific LRA location will be taken by the Defra Secretary of State after considering all relevant scientific and veterinary advice. All the stringent licensing criteria set out in Defra's guidance to Natural England will need to be met by the cull company.

In summer 2017, we consulted on a proposal to pay compensation at 50% of the average market price for any animal brought into a TB breakdown herd which then fails a TB test while that breakdown is still ongoing. This already happens in Wales and I have decided that it should apply in England from 1 November 2018. The proposal is intended to encourage herd owners to take further steps to improve their disease controls in a sensible and proportionate manner. One way they can do this is to seek accreditation under a scheme based on the standards laid down by the Cattle Health Certification Standards (CHeCS) body. Herds which are accredited at the time of the breakdown will continue to receive 100% compensation for all compulsorily slaughtered cattle.

In a further strengthening of our testing regime, in December 2017 we confirmed that surveillance testing for most herds in the high-risk area will take place at six monthly intervals to improve early detection and eradication of disease, and to prevent it spreading to new areas. We have decided that this change should take effect from early 2020, when the next generation of TB testing contracts with veterinary delivery partners will be put in place.

The TB strategy review led by Professor Sir Charles Godfray, announced in February, is considering how to take the strategy to the next phase, so we are able to deploy all tools to tackle this terrible disease. Currently in their evidence-gathering phase, the reviewers are examining progress with implementation and how we can improve, enhance or accelerate our approach.

Copies of the summary of consultation responses and way forward document have been placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS720]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Exit

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Today we are publishing four documents produced by the UK negotiating team for discussion with the EU.

These cover:

- External security
- Internal security
- Galileo
- Economic partnership

These will be available on gov.uk and copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Tomorrow we will be publishing a document on the exchange of classified information, which was produced by the UK negotiating team for discussion with the EU. This will be available on gov.uk and a copy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS725]

General Affairs Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) meeting in Brussels on Monday 14 May 2018. The agenda covered the multiannual financial framework (MFF) post-2020, the annotated draft agenda for the European Council on 28 and 29 June 2018, and rule of law in Poland/article 7(1) treaty on European Union (TEU) reasoned proposal.

A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union's website at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2018/05/14/>

Multiannual financial framework (MFF) post-2020

Gunther Oettinger, European Commissioner for Budget and Human Resources, presented the Commission's proposal for a post-2020 MFF. He set out the political context and the need for funding for new priorities, such as migration and defence. I expressed the UK's interest in participating in programmes promoting science, education and mutual security.

Annotated draft agenda for the European Council on 28 and 29 June 2018

The presidency presented the annotated draft agenda for June European Council (JEC), which included: migration; security and defence; jobs, growth and competitiveness; innovation and digital; and external relations. Trade and enlargement may also be added to the agenda.

I intervened on the security and defence item to highlight the importance of maintaining momentum in facing challenges like terrorism and organised crime. I also welcomed discussion on a continued response to the attack on Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury on 4 March. On trade, I expressed that the UK remained concerned over US proposals to introduce tariffs for aluminium and steel imports and continued to press for an EU-wide exemption. I also stated that the UK would welcome discussion of this issue at JEC.

Rule of law in Poland/article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans updated Ministers on the ongoing dialogue between the Commission and Poland. He concluded that Poland's recent reforms were insufficient to remove the risk of a threat to the rule of law and that more progress was needed. Ministers highlighted the need for continuation of dialogue and further reforms by Poland. The Commission indicated its intention to continue dialogue with Poland and provide a final opinion on the matter at the June GAC.

I intervened to highlight the importance of the rule of law, welcomed the progress so far, and emphasised that the best solution was one reached through constructive dialogue.

[HCWS724]

European Union Citizenship

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Her Majesty's Government welcomed the sincere and well-informed debate on this highly topical subject on 7 March 2018, and therefore did not oppose the motion.

From the very beginning citizens have been at the heart of Her Majesty's Government's approach to negotiations. The Prime Minister was clear that safeguarding the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and UK nationals living in the EU was her first priority. This is a commitment we have delivered, and the agreement reached and set out in the withdrawal agreement text will provide citizens with certainty about their rights going forward.

The agreement grants citizens certainty about a wide range of rights, including residents' healthcare, as well as pensions and other benefits. This will mean that UK nationals who are legally resident in the EU by the end of the implementation period will continue to benefit from rights that stem from their EU citizenship today. After the end of the implementation period, those rights will be provided for by the withdrawal agreement, which will enshrine them and take the status of international law, having direct effect in EU member states. The agreement will also be written into UK law by Parliament, to put in place reciprocal protections for EU citizens resident in the UK.

Her Majesty's Government will always be happy to listen to any proposals on our exit from the European Union. However, as EU treaty provisions make clear, only citizens of EU member states are able to hold EU citizenship. This will mean that when the UK ceases to be a member of the European Union, UK nationals will no longer hold EU citizenship, unless they hold dual nationality of another EU member state.

To that end, associate EU citizenship is not one of our negotiating objectives and is not provided for by the EU treaties. For UK nationals to remain EU citizens after the UK's exit from the EU, an amendment to the EU treaties would be required. Citizenship is the fundamental status of nationals of EU member states and while the EEA EFTA states are in the single market their nationals are not EU citizens and as such have more limited rights. This is not therefore something we could realistically expect the EU to agree to.

In March the Prime Minister set out the Government's intention for a deep and special future partnership with the EU. She acknowledged that UK nationals will still want to work and study in EU countries—just as EU citizens will want to do the same here, helping to drive growth, innovation and enterprise. The Prime Minister made clear that businesses across the EU and the UK must be able to attract and employ the people they need, and that the Government are open to discussing how to facilitate these valuable links, within the context of new policies which manage migration at sustainable levels, in the UK's best long-term interests.

Her Majesty's Government will, at every step of these negotiations, work to secure the best possible deal for all UK nationals, including those currently living in the EU and those who wish to travel to the EU in future.

Her Majesty's Government have been clear that as a result of leaving the European Union, the United Kingdom will no longer be a part of the single market. We have

listened to EU leaders and we understand and respect the position that the four freedoms of the single market are indivisible and there can be no cherry-picking. Instead, we are seeking the broadest and deepest possible partnership with the EU—covering more sectors and co-operating more fully than any free trade agreement anywhere in the world today.

Her Majesty's Government believe that UK nationals were citizens of Europe long before the introduction of EU citizenship through the Maastricht treaty in 1993. The United Kingdom may be leaving the political and legal structures of the EU, but UK nationals will not be any less European as a result.

[HCWS726]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 28 May. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.

The FAC will discuss current affairs, Iran, DRC, Post-Cotonou and Venezuela and possibly the middle east peace process (MEPP).

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL

Iran

Ministers will have a substantive discussion on the joint comprehensive plan of action (JCPoA) following the decision of the US to withdraw from the agreement. The FAC will consider a package of economic measures being drawn up by the EU that aim to protect European business interests and enable the EU to continue to meet commitments to sanctions relief to Iran under the JCPoA. The UK continues to view the Iran nuclear deal as important for our shared security, and therefore remains firmly committed to ensuring it is upheld. To this end, we are working with the remaining parties to the deal.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Ministers will have an initial discussion on the political situation in the DRC. They will consider progress towards overdue presidential elections, now scheduled for 23 December 2018, which we hope will see the first peaceful transition of power in the independent history of the country. The UK is a leading voice in international efforts to ensure these elections take place as planned. We will focus on the need to ensure that the international community remains united in putting pressure on the Government of the DRC to meet the democratic aspirations of its people.

Post-Cotonou

The FAC will adopt the negotiating mandate for a post-2020 agreement between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of countries. The FAC will give an initial political steer to the Commission ahead of the negotiations, which will be formally launched at the EU-ACP Council of Ministers in Togo on 31 May.

Venezuela

Ministers will discuss the political situation in Venezuela following presidential elections held on 20 May. The FAC will also consider how to respond to the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Venezuela and its impact on the region.

MEPP

Following the opening of the US embassy to Israel in Jerusalem and recent violence along the Gaza border, Ministers will have an exchange of views on prospects for the middle east peace process.

Any other business (AOB)

Under AOB, the UK and France are planning to update the FAC on their ongoing efforts to strengthen compliance with the chemical weapons convention.

Council conclusions

The FAC is expected to adopt conclusions on strengthening civilian CSDP, enhanced EU security engagement in and with Asia, the special report by the European Court of Auditors: “Election Observation Missions—Efforts made to follow up recommendations but better monitoring needed”, and on small arms and light weapons.

[HCWS721]

HOME DEPARTMENT**Immigration****The Secretary of State for the Home Department**

(Sajid Javid): I have been very clear that the Government deeply regret what has happened to some of the Windrush generation and about our determination to put it right. Both my predecessor as Home Secretary and I have set out to Parliament the immediate steps that we took to assist those in the Windrush generation but were clear that this was simply a precursor for a more formal arrangement.

I have today laid a statutory instrument which will bring into force the “Windrush scheme” which will ensure that members of the Windrush generation, their children born in the UK and who arrived in the UK as minors, and others who have been in the United Kingdom for a long period of time, will be able to obtain the documents to confirm their status and, in appropriate cases, be able to obtain British citizenship free of charge.

The Windrush scheme, which will be a distinct scheme, will make it easier for those concerned to receive the support they need and to understand what is on offer. Those applying under the scheme will benefit from the services of the taskforce which will help people to navigate the immigration system and continue to take a sympathetic and proactive approach when assisting people in confirming their status.

The new scheme will come into operation next Wednesday, 30 May. Breaching the normal 21 day rule between laying a Statutory Instrument and its commencement is not something I have done lightly and I am very mindful of the need to observe normal parliamentary protocols. However, my judgment is that the imperative to get the new scheme up and running as

swiftly as possible requires this course of action. The Immigration Minister has written to the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee to explain further our reasoning.

The new scheme will ensure that members of the Windrush generation—Commonwealth citizens who were settled in the UK before 1973—will be able to apply to become British citizens more easily. They will be deemed to have met the normal requirement for knowledge of language and life in the UK and will not be required to attend a citizenship ceremony, unless they want to. There will be no fees to pay.

Commonwealth citizens who were settled before 1973 but who do not wish to become British citizens, those who are not eligible, and citizens of other nationalities who were settled before 1973 will be provided with documents which confirm their right to remain permanently in the UK and to access services. Again, there will be no fees payable.

Children of the Windrush generation who were born in the UK will themselves be British, though in some cases they may want a document to confirm that status. Others will have the right to register as British. We will facilitate that through the taskforce and waive any application fees involved.

We are providing that a child of a member of the Windrush generation who was born abroad and who came to live in the UK before they were 18 and is still here is eligible for a free application for a document confirming their status or, if they wish, a free application for citizenship.

My predecessor undertook to consider the position of those who came to the UK between 1973 and 1988, when immigration and nationality law changed. Unlike the earlier generation, these people should have had documentary evidence of their entitlement to be in the UK but may no longer be able to prove it. Where they are lawfully in the UK, they can apply for the necessary documentation confirming that free of charge.

There is already provision in the immigration system for people whose permanent residence status has lapsed, through a prolonged absence from the UK, to resume their residence here, by obtaining a returning resident visa. It is limited to people who have spent most of their lives in the UK. I am adjusting the visa rules to ensure they are interpreted generously in respect of the Windrush generation, who spent a considerable time in the UK and who may have been unaware that they were forfeiting residence here when they left, for example because they considered themselves British. Again, that application will be made available free of charge.

Equally, there are those of the Windrush generation who retired to another country but want to return to the UK temporarily as visitors to see friends and family. I believe we should make a generous offer to them, recognising their special position and relationship with this country and those who qualify can apply for a visit visa free of charge, valid for 10 years.

In my written statement of 10 May, I announced the opening of the call for evidence on compensation. I am pleased to say that there has been a good response with almost 100 responses received to date. In addition, the Home Office has started an active programme of outreach to understand better the experiences of individuals and help inform the design of the compensation scheme.

My officials have made contact with a number of community organisations and their representatives, and have attended events in a number of hon Members' constituencies. This programme will continue and expand in the weeks ahead, working with Martin Forde QC, the independent person that is overseeing the design of the scheme.

All of this is about swiftly putting wrong the injustices that have been done to the Windrush generation. However, it is also fundamentally important that the lessons from this episode are learned for the future, so that this never happens again.

As I made clear to the House on 2 May, I will therefore ensure that a thorough review is conducted of what happened and why, looking particularly at:

- how members of the Windrush generation came to be entangled in measures designed for illegal immigrants;
- why that was not spotted sooner; and
- whether the right corrective measures are now in place.

I will also be taking steps to ensure that the review is subject to robust independent oversight and challenge.

[HCWS722]

Europol: Personal Data

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Until the UK leaves it remains a full member of the European Union with all the rights and responsibilities this entails. The Government will continue to consider the application of the UK's right to opt in to, or opt out of, forthcoming EU legislation in the area of justice and home affairs on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our country's security, protecting our civil liberties and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

The Government have decided to opt-in to Council decisions authorising negotiations between the EU and Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Algeria to conclude agreements on the exchange of personal data with Europol.

The UK values the role of Europol in helping law enforcement agencies co-ordinate investigations in cross-border serious and organised crime and terrorism. As Europol does not currently have data sharing agreements with any other countries in the Mediterranean and north African region, these agreements could help to increase the security of the UK through helping to improve counter-terrorism, organised crime and illegal migration efforts in that region.

Opting in provides an opportunity for us to influence the negotiation of these agreements, including to ensure that UK concerns around human rights are reflected.

[HCWS723]

JUSTICE

Prison Education and Employment

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Today, the Government are launching the Education and Employment Strategy for adult prisoners. It builds on the ambitions of the November 2016 White Paper "Prison Safety and Reform".

Work has the power to change people's lives, especially those of ex-prisoners. A prison sentence rightly serves as a punishment, depriving someone of their liberty. However, for those offenders who want to turn their backs on crime, prison should also be a catalyst for change. The vision at the heart of this strategy is that when an offender enters prison they should be put, immediately, on the path to employment on release.

We know that people with criminal convictions face significant barriers on release from prison, with access to employment and education being at the forefront. Not only are many ex-prisoners often unprepared for employment on release in terms of their skills and training, there remains a stigma among some employers about hiring people with a criminal conviction. With reoffending costing the UK billions each year, this strategy sets out to help break down the barriers and prejudices offenders often face in trying to secure employment.

Our reforms to prison education will give governors the tools they need to tailor provision to the requirements of employers and the needs of their prisoner populations. This approach builds on the commitments we made in the White Paper "Prison Safety and Reform", putting into practice the key principles of governor empowerment and accountability that underpinned the recommendations in Dame Sally Coates' seminal review. Governors will control their education budget, will decide what curriculum is most appropriate for their learner population, how it is organised and, crucially, who delivers it. These are far-reaching changes that governors themselves demand.

It is essential that governors develop their skills and gather experience through work during custodial sentences. Prison jobs are a key part of this, as is release on temporary licence (ROTL), which enables prisoners to undertake work in real workplaces. Evidence published today underlines the link between increased use of ROTL and reduced reoffending and we are also today consulting those who make ROTL decisions and those who provide ROTL placements on how to get more risk-assessed prisoners out of their cells and into real workplaces.

For offenders who play by the rules, we want to use incentives like workplace ROTL to encourage continued good behaviour and help support a turn away from violence and disorder in our prisons. We will develop a new operational policy framework that will allow prison governors to better tailor their ROTL regime to the circumstances of each offender and the opportunities available.

The strategy also sets a range of commitments to boost employment for prisoners once they are released. These include:

The New Futures Network (NFN) will engage and persuade employers to take on ex-prisoners, with experts placed in every geographical prison group in a phased roll-out across England and Wales.

The civil service will recruit ex-prisoners, providing jobs and acting as a role model for other employers.

The DWP and Ministry of Justice will work together to explore new ways to deliver enhancements to the current benefit claim service, so that prison leavers have immediate easier access to financial support on the day of release.

[HCWS719]

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