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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 25 October 2018

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Secretary of State was asked—

No Deal: UK Border Delays

1. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential for UK border delays in the event that no deal is agreed for when the UK leaves the EU. [907258]

6. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential for UK border delays in the event that no deal is agreed for when the UK leaves the EU. [907264]

7. **Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential for UK border delays in the event that no deal is agreed for when the UK leaves the EU. [907265]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): The Government have published 106 technical notices addressing the no-deal scenario. We are striving for a good deal with our European Union partners, but we will be ready for all outcomes from the negotiations.

Gerald Jones: Recent National Audit Office estimates state that if customs declarations are required for trading between the UK and the EU, the total number of declarations could increase by about 360%, from 55 million currently on non-EU trade to 225 million. What estimate has the Minister made of the additional staff that will be required and, not least, the likely tailbacks that could ensue at UK ports?

Dominic Raab: There certainly is a risk of no deal, especially if the EU engages in a deliberately intransigent approach. The hon. Gentleman asks about staff. We are recruiting 300 extra staff, with a further 600 planned. We have given a range of advice through our 106 technical notices, half of which gave advice on customs procedures for businesses. There have been 300,000 letters sent to current customs users and 145,000 letters to VAT-registered businesses.

Liz McInnes: The Health Secretary told pharmaceutical companies to stockpile six weeks' worth of medicines in case of a no-deal Brexit because of potential delays at the border. Will the Brexit Secretary confirm whether he envisages circumstances where companies could be asked to stockpile for longer than six weeks?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue, not least because Government and the pharmaceutical industry already liaise on stockpiling for far longer periods in other circumstances, including in relation to vaccines. We will keep it under review, but this is something the industry is used to doing and we are used to co-operating with it.

Sandy Martin: In September, the Borders Delivery Group reported that 11 of the 12 major projects to replace or change key IT systems were at risk of not being delivered on time or in a workable condition. Many of my constituents who work at the port of Felixstowe are at their wits' end about how this is going to work. Can the Secretary of State tell us what is going to be done with those IT systems?

Dominic Raab: We had an extended Cabinet session last month. We looked at a whole range of action points right across the piece, including some of the IT issues to which the hon. Gentleman refers. We want to make sure we are in the best position to manage, avoid or mitigate any risk in a no-deal scenario, but of course we are striving for the best deal with our European partners.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): A very significant number of automotive parts enter the UK and the European Union from third countries for just-in-time delivery. It seems to work, doesn't it?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend will know that that is one of the reasons the White Paper proposals deal with the kind of customs arrangements and co-operation with our EU partners which will not just prevent friction at the border, but, particularly in relation to just-in-time manufacturers, provide them with the frictionless trade they need.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Can we be absolutely sure that, should this House reject a deal brought back by the Government, we will still leave the European Union on 29 March, and that those who vote against that deal will be responsible for no deal?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend raises, responsibly and assiduously, the stark reality of those who would seek to wreck the deal, as the Labour party leadership has suggested, come what may. Every hon. Member of this House will have a choice to make between the good deal we are confident we will bring back and the alternatives.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that in the event of no deal the UK Government will not create a hard border on the island of Ireland? And if we do not do it, who does he think will?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is attempting to draw me down an avenue of inquiry I will not be pursuing. What I will say is that we have made it clear that under no circumstances will we see or erect a hard border in relation to Northern Ireland.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): This week the NAO warned that not a single one of the Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs' preparations for a no-deal Brexit

was in anything other than a red-amber state of lack of preparedness. That is on top of the 80,000 lost Scottish jobs, £2,300 out of the pockets of every Scottish household and a 9% hit to our economy that a no-deal Brexit is likely to bring. Is the Secretary of State seriously telling us that it is possible for him and the Prime Minister to bring back a bad deal that is worse than that?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the risks of no deal, but the point is to have the planning and preparations in place to ensure we can avoid or mitigate those risks. In addition to the remarks I made earlier, £8 million of funding for customs intermediaries has been announced. We also need to prepare for the worst-case scenario, whereby the authorities at Calais are deliberately directing a go-slow approach, by supporting a diversion of the flow to more amenable ports in other countries.

Peter Grant: HMRC will not have the capacity to cope and the Border Force will not have the capacity to cope, but at least we know that the Government's capacity for incompetence is utterly unbounded. The Secretary of State is criticising others for so-called intransigence. Is it not time for the Government to drop their own intransigent stance, go right back to the beginning, rub out the three stupid red lines and start again?

Dominic Raab: If the hon. Gentleman thinks that at this late stage of negotiations, we can go back to the beginning, I am afraid his approach is rather delusional. We have made good progress and we are close to agreeing a deal. The responsible thing for Members from all parts of the House to do, regardless of their views on Brexit, is to get behind the Government so we can clinch that good deal for all quarters and all parts of the UK.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Has the Secretary of State made the Republic of Ireland aware that if the French start mucking about with Calais and a go-slow in the event of no deal, the biggest impact will be not on UK trade but on trade with the Republic of Ireland that passes through this country?

Dominic Raab: I am confident that the authorities in Dublin are well aware of the implications of no deal. All of us, on all sides—not just in this House but in the EU—want to lock horns, close the outstanding issues and seal the good deal that will serve everyone's interests.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): As you will know, Mr Speaker, Labour's 2017 general election manifesto was rightly hailed as a transformative blueprint for a Britain that works for the many, not the few, but even we did not go so far as to propose the nationalisation of roll-off, roll-on lorry ferries. In addition to contingency plans for Government-owned or operated logistics, can the Secretary of State tell us which other industries the Government are considering taking into public ownership under a no-deal scenario?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we need to look at all possible contingencies to ensure that in a no-deal scenario British businesses and livelihoods are safeguarded. I think it was rather unfortunate of him to refer to the Labour manifesto, because with

the Labour party's current commitment to rejecting any deal that the Government bring back opening the door to a second referendum, the Labour leadership have driven a coach and horses straight through the promises that they made to every Labour voter at the last election.

Leaving the EU

2. **Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to protect the integrity of the UK after the UK leaves the EU. [907259]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): We are negotiating to secure a strong deal that works for the whole United Kingdom, and our White Paper proposals will deliver on that.

Giles Watling: I do not believe in a second referendum, and I have grave doubts about referendums in general. We had the vote, and the people voted to leave. I voted to remain. Now, after all this time and division, what are we going to do to heal the scars left by the referendum?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; a second referendum would create far more uncertainty than it would resolve, and would erode public trust in our democracy. We will heal the divisions created by the campaign and the politics of Brexit by delivering on the outcome of the referendum, and by making sure that we deliver jobs for working families and build homes for the next generation beyond the Brexit negotiations.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Now that we know that the referendum that delivered this entire process was conducted illegally, surely that is another reason to give us all a people's vote at the end of the process. The Secretary of State can have his Bill endorsed, and we can have the option to remain, because we know what that looks like.

Dominic Raab: I always listen to the hon. Lady, who is thoughtful and passionate in her views. However, I think that a second referendum would create a huge amount of uncertainty, returning us to square one and eroding public trust in the system.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend been able respectfully to persuade our negotiating partners that Northern Ireland is not some enclave of the character of those around the area of the Bodensee, for example, but an integral part of the United Kingdom that is not, in any circumstances, to be split off from our country?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have made the point that we would never accept any proposals that would threaten the integrity of the United Kingdom, whether constitutional or economic. We have also made the point that a lot of the proposals that we have seen would not be acceptable to many on the EU side, given the separatist pressures in places such as Corsica, Catalonia and other parts of Europe.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree that Brexit represents a real opportunity to become a global United Kingdom, free to make vital

trade deals with countries across the world? Does he feel that increasing the backstop would be unhelpful because it would only hamper our ability to negotiate trade deals and would not help to resolve any outstanding issues?

Dominic Raab: I certainly agree that we must secure the right deal that strikes the right balance between preserving the frictionless trade that we want with our EU partners and taking advantage of the global opportunities of the future, from Latin America to Asia. We have committed ourselves to providing a backstop in case there is a gap between the end of the implementation period and the coming into effect of the future relationship, but we will do nothing to threaten—and will not accept anything that does threaten—the integrity of the United Kingdom.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Every nation in our Union exports more to the rest of the UK than it does to the EU27, and the UK internal market accounts for 61% of Scotland's exports. Can the Secretary of State assure me that he will do what makes sense for the Union and for the Scottish economy?

Dominic Raab: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. It is true that we have a large export relationship with our EU partners, but equally, as the EU itself recognises, the vast majority—the lion's share—of future growth opportunities will lie with the growth markets of the future, from Latin America to Asia, as I said earlier.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Last Sunday, when the Secretary of State was asked on "The Andrew Marr Show" how long the proposed UK-wide customs backstop might last, he said:

"It could be time-limited, there could be another mechanism."

Whichever of the two it turns out to be, can the right hon. Gentleman assure the House that the backstop—if needed—would not be terminated before the conclusion of our negotiations on the future partnership? If he is not able to give that assurance, will he tell the House what would replace it to ensure that the border in Northern Ireland remained open?

Dominic Raab: The Chair of the Select Committee is right to say that we need to respect our commitment to provide a bridge between the end of the implementation period and the future relationship. That does need to be something we are not locked into indefinitely, and, of course, the EU side cannot agree anything under article 50—which provides only for the winding down of the EU arrangements—that would allow something to be indefinite, so this ought to be a matter that there is mutual interest in and agreement on resolving.

Border Arrangements

3. **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What progress he has made on securing an agreement with the EU on future border arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. [907260]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (**Dominic Raab**): Our White Paper proposals will ensure that there is frictionless trade at the border, which is in the interests of businesses but will also avoid any potential extra infrastructure at the border in Northern Ireland.

Kevin Brennan: Does the Secretary of State understand why some of us who have Irish heritage are worried by what is said by some Conservative Members such as the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who said a moment ago that under no circumstances could Northern Ireland be split off from the United Kingdom? He knows full well that the Belfast agreement envisages that prospect if the people of Northern Ireland and the people of Ireland agree to it, and that is Government policy. Will he confirm his commitment to the Belfast agreement, and will he also confirm the Government's commitment to the agreement made last December with the EU about the future of the border in Northern Ireland?

Dominic Raab: I certainly do understand all the sensitivities on this side. In fairness, I think my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) was referring to the negotiations, and whether we would accept anything relating to them that would have the effect of drawing a line down the Irish sea or threatening the integrity of the UK. But, of course, the Belfast agreement says that nothing should happen in relation to Northern Ireland without the consent of Northern Ireland, and we will not allow the EU to threaten that.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Last week I met a group of young people from Northern Ireland who were members of Our Future Our Choice. They were clearly extremely worried about the border arrangements, and also very worried that they might not retain the right that I have had, and the Secretary of State has had, to live, work and study in the European Union. What guarantees can the Secretary of State give them that they will be able to continue to do that after we have left the EU?

Dominic Raab: I think we can provide that assurance, not just in relation to the progress that we have made in the withdrawal agreement, but as a result of the commitment made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that would guarantee the rights of EU nationals in the event of no deal. For those who are anxious about the uncertainty that lies ahead, the very worst outcome would be a second referendum, which is the policy of the Liberal Democrats, and which would only make that uncertainty worse.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): On Monday, the Prime Minister said that if the UK and the EU were to make a legally binding commitment to a "temporary UK-EU joint customs territory",—[*Official Report*, 22 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 47.]

the EU's proposal for a Northern Ireland-specific customs proposal "is no longer needed". If it is "no longer needed", does that mean that it will no longer be in the withdrawal agreement, or does the Prime Minister really mean that she thinks it will no longer ever need to come into force?

Dominic Raab: I think the Prime Minister was very clear on that. We will not be able to accept any Northern Ireland-specific arrangement that would leave Northern Ireland in a customs regime that was separate from that of the rest of the United Kingdom. It is as simple as that.

Transition Period

4. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What changes there will be in the relationship between the UK and the EU during the transition period after the UK leaves the EU on 29 March 2019. [907261]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Braverman): After the UK leaves the EU on 29 March 2019 the implementation period will provide a bridge to our future relationship, ensuring that citizens and businesses only have to plan for one set of changes. During the implementation period the UK will no longer be a member state of the EU, nor will it have MEPs at the European Parliament or a judge at the European Court of Justice. We will have the freedom to negotiate, sign and ratify new trade deals with third countries, although they will not come into force until the end of the implementation period.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, but clearly the position should be that on day zero we are a full member of the EU and by the end of the transition period we have no connection other than the future arrangements that we have. It seems to me that instead of a curve as we reduce the transition period, all we have is a postponing of the cliff edge and a delayed departure. Will my hon. Friend comment?

Suella Braverman: I take note of my hon. Friend's comments. The aim of the implementation period is to provide certainty for businesses and individuals with access to each other's markets on terms similar to those today. There will be a number of changes to reflect the UK's new status as a third country—those I mentioned before—but crucially we have got new opportunities to start taking steps to enjoy our new freedoms, and that time should be used effectively.

20. [907279] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is reported that the Government are considering a proposal to make the transition period renewable on an annual basis. Are those reports accurate?

Suella Braverman: No.

Carbon Tax

5. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): If he will hold discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on proposals to introduce a carbon tax to replace the EU emissions trading system in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal. [907263]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Secretary of State and I meet regularly with ministerial colleagues to discuss a range of EU exit-related matters. As the recently published meeting climate change requirements technical notice made clear, in the unlikely event of no deal the UK Government will initially meet our existing carbon pricing commitments via the tax system, taking effect in 2019.

Alex Cunningham: The carbon tax as outlined would be devastating for companies such as CF Fertilisers in Stockton and energy-intensive industries across the country. Will the level of relief against the proposed carbon tax or any other new arrangement for energy-intensive industries leave exposed industries with no greater financial burden than they have under the EU emissions trading scheme?

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is a very good question for a Treasury Minister. More details will follow at next week's Budget, with legislation to follow in the upcoming Finance Bill.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Some excellent biotechnology research is going on in universities across the UK, including in my constituency. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that will continue to be the case after 29 March next year?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The Government are committed to ensure that science and new technologies such as the one the hon. Gentleman mentions are able to continue and thrive in a future relationship, deal or no deal.

Gibraltar

8. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that HM Government of Gibraltar is consulted throughout the negotiations for the UK to leave the EU. [907266]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): The Government remain committed to fully involving the Government of Gibraltar as we leave the EU together. We have been working closely together including through the Joint Ministerial Council for Gibraltar on EU negotiations, which has met seven times since the referendum. In addition, I am in regular contact with the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, most recently at the Gibraltar Day celebrations in London this week, when we both welcomed the real progress made in negotiations.

Nigel Huddleston: I warmly welcome the apparent agreement on Gibraltar with our Spanish friends—and I do mean friends, because 10,000 Spaniards work in Gibraltar every day, the UK is Spain's fifth biggest trading partner, and 18 million Brits went to Spain last year. Will the Minister confirm that it is in the best interests of Spain, Gibraltar and the UK that we have as frictionless a flow of goods, tourists and workers as possible?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: a good deal is in the interests of all sides. Gibraltar is an engine of prosperity for the surrounding area, and a deal that benefits Gibraltar will also benefit the wider region. A well-managed and smoothly operational Gibraltar-Spain border is vital for prosperity. It is important not only for the flow of frontier workers, but, as my hon. Friend says, for the flow of tourists and other visitors, who make a key contribution to Gibraltar's thriving economy. And our strong relations with Spain are underpinned by deep economic, cultural and people-to-people links, which we want to strengthen moving forward. We look forward to enhanced co-operation, which will benefit Spain, Gibraltar and the UK.

Mr Speaker: That was very interesting, but rather long.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is most significant indeed that yesterday the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, in saluting the support the Prime Minister has personally given to the negotiations, observed that for the first time the Prime Minister of Spain has publicly accepted that the inclusion of a protocol to protect the interests of Gibraltar is a done deal if there is a deal and an agreement? Does that not demonstrate how important it is for any friend of Gibraltar that there is a deal and it is carried in this House?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know that he has worked assiduously through the all-party parliamentary group on Gibraltar to protect and promote the interests of Gibraltar. I would like to return the compliment to the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, who has played a crucial role in these negotiations.

Environmental Protection

9. **Karen Lee** (Lincoln) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the effect on UK environmental protection of the UK leaving the EU. [907267]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): We continue to have regular conversations with ministerial colleagues across the Government on all aspects of exiting the European Union, including environmental policy. The UK has a long history of environmental protection, and the Government have been clear that they have no intention of weakening our current environmental protections as we leave the European Union.

Karen Lee: I visited one of my local schools a few weeks ago, and the young people there are very worried about plastic use. This Government are unambitiously pledging to eliminate avoidable plastic waste significantly later than the EU target. Does the Minister agree with me and with the children at the Lincoln Carlton Academy that, with climate change posing an immediate threat, Britain's environmental protections must not be downgraded after we leave the EU?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, and we would not be doing that. In fact, the Prime Minister has announced that a new environment Bill will be introduced in the second Session to build on the vision we have set out in our 25-year environment plan to leave our precious environment in a better state than the one we inherited. It will help us to create richer habitats for wildlife, improve air and water quality and curb the scourge of plastic in the world's oceans.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will the excellent Minister tell the House who he thinks will be better prepared to look after the United Kingdom's interests on the environment: this Parliament or EU bureaucrats?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the excellent Back Bencher—my neighbour—for his question. I obviously believe that this Parliament is better placed to do that.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday's National Audit Office report on the lack of no-deal preparations lists a whole raft of serious issues facing our country in the eventuality of no deal, particularly on environmental standards, where it points to a collapse of our biosecurity standards. What is the Minister's response to this, given that the Secretary of State said a moment ago that he was looking at all scenarios? Frankly, that is not good enough, so what will he and his Department do to ensure that we are adequately prepared?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I hope that the hon. Lady will forgive me, but I just do not read the NAO report in the same way that she does. We are obviously preparing for a no deal. We have regular meetings to ensure that we will hit all our targets, and I am confident that we will do so.

Citizens' Rights

10. **Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to secure citizenship rights for (a) UK citizens residing in the EU and (b) EU citizens residing in the UK after the UK leaves the EU. [907268]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): We have agreed to protect the rights of EU citizens in the UK and UK nationals in the EU under the withdrawal agreement. Our message to EU nationals is that we value the contribution that you make and we want you to stay.

Julian Knight: My question has been prompted by a particular case at my surgery involving a German couple who have been here for many years and contributed hugely to my town of Solihull. They have been concerned by scare stories and by EU intransigence on this issue, and they would like me to ask the Secretary of State whether he can clearly confirm that, after Brexit, EU citizens in the UK and UK nationals in the EU will be able to continue to live their lives as they do today.

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Of course, under the withdrawal agreement, we have set out very clearly the rights that people would have in order to give effect to the assurance that he is seeking. They include the right to stay in this country; the right to work; protection for those working as frontier workers; the right for close family members to join them; the recognition of EEA professional qualifications; and a role for the independent monitoring authority in relation to the application of the citizens' rights element of the agreement, which would mirror what the Commission will do for UK citizens on the continent.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister seriously believe that the Home Office will be able to cope with the number of applications from EU citizens, when its existing immigration systems are in overload?

Dominic Raab: I have had a number of conversations with the Home Secretary and indeed with the Cabinet to ensure that not only the legislation but the operational systems will be in place.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): A technical notice on EU citizens in the UK was expected as part of the no-deal preparations. That was confirmed in a recent technical notice from the Department for Transport, but it has not yet been produced and the Prime Minister's spokesman apparently told journalists on Tuesday that there were no more notices in the pipeline. Will the Secretary of State clarify which is correct? If there is to be a notice, will he tell us when it will be published?

Dominic Raab: Most hon. Members would agree that citizens' rights are an issue of scale, importance and sensitivity, which means that it will be dealt with not in technical notices, but in a different format. However, I reassure the hon. Gentleman that all the details will be coming along shortly to provide the assurances that I think both sides of the House want to give to EU nationals here. We value their contribution and want them to stay.

Paul Blomfield: Both sides of the House certainly do want those assurances, but I am unsure whether that answer provides them, so let me try with another issue. The Prime Minister said that, in the event of no deal, she will make a unilateral offer to EU citizens remaining in the UK, but the right to remain in itself does not provide the reassurance that they need. Will the Secretary of State therefore confirm that, in those circumstances, their rights will be identical in every respect to the provisions in the withdrawal agreement as currently drafted?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is right that the Prime Minister made that commitment after the Salzburg summit. We are going to set out all the details in due course, but I can give him some reassurance right now, because the healthcare Bill, which is due to be introduced shortly, will provide reassurance, for example, in the context of reciprocal healthcare for UK nationals who live in, work in or visit the EU, regardless of the outcome of the negotiations. The hon. Gentleman will have to wait just a bit longer for all the details.

Customs Arrangements

11. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on negotiations for customs arrangements with the EU after the UK leaves the EU. [907269]

15. **Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on negotiations for customs arrangements with the EU after the UK leaves the EU. [907273]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): I have regular discussions in Cabinet, led by the Prime Minister, on all aspects of our future economic partnership with the EU, which of course includes the customs arrangements.

Nick Smith: How is the Secretary of State going to persuade the hardliners on the Conservative Benches behind him about the benefits of a customs union for jobs and for defending the United Kingdom?

Dominic Raab: We made a clear commitment that we will be leaving the customs union, so I do not think it is a question in the way the hon. Gentleman has described. Our White Paper proposals are designed to secure frictionless trade at the border, which is important for all businesses, particularly the UK's just-in-time manufacturers.

Ian Murray: Will the Secretary of State tell us what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Scotland about the incompatible arguments that the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland can have different customs and trading arrangements but have no border, but Scotland and England would require a border if Scotland were independent? Is the Brexit that the Government are pursuing not just giving more succour to the nationalists?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that issue. I have regular discussions with all my Cabinet colleagues, and we are clear that we will not allow any proposals to be accepted by the EU that would threaten the territorial, constitutional or economic integrity of the United Kingdom, and that means the whole of the United Kingdom.

21. [907280] **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): On the subject of the long-term customs relationship between the EU and the UK, what discussions has my right hon. Friend had with his EU counterparts?

Dominic Raab: We have regular discussions with our EU counterparts about all aspects of the relationship, and we are making good progress. Of course, I cannot give the full details or provide the reassurance that my hon. Friend and others would want until we have the full deal, because there is no deal until we have the whole deal.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The withdrawal agreement makes provision to bind us into paying an exit payment of £39 billion. What provisions are there to ensure that the future trade agreement, which will only be in the form of a political statement, will actually get delivered and that we will not find ourselves paying the £39 billion without locking in the future trade arrangements in return?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I know that he and other hon. Members are concerned about that. We need a package in place that not only deals with the separation issues and the money in the way that he described, but has a clear path and a clear commitment to put the future relationship into effect.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): It has been reported that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit and chaos at the Channel ports, the Government will need to charter additional vessels to bring in food and medicine. What is the assessment of cost for both the Government and industry? What capacity is there in alternative ports to do that?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Of course, any blockage at the border ought to be addressed with pragmatism on both sides to alleviate it, but we must ensure that we are in a position, regardless of what the EU, the French or any other EU member state does, to weather any short-term disruption. We will ensure not only that we have the money and investment in place, but that we are co-operating with businesses and port authorities not just in the UK, but in Belgium, the Netherlands and other parts of the EU.

Fishermen

12. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for fishermen after the UK leaves the EU. [907270]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Braverman): We continue to work closely with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for fishermen after we leave the European Union. The Fisheries Bill, introduced today, will allow us, for the first time since 1973, to take back control of our waters, set our own fisheries rules and exclusively determine who fishes what in our seas as an independent coastal state. That will ensure a sustainable and profitable fishing industry that will regenerate coastal communities and support future generations of UK fishermen.

Sir David Amess: Sea fishermen and cocklers are greatly looking forward to our leaving the European Union at 11 o'clock on 29 March 2019, but will my hon. Friend reassure them that their expected increase in living standards will not be damaged by any extension to the transition period?

Suella Braverman: I fully recognise the importance to fishing communities in Leigh-on-Sea of leaving the common fisheries policy, and my hon. Friend is a strong voice for those communities. We fully expect to negotiate as an independent coastal state in 2020 and, as the Prime Minister set out earlier this week, the interests of UK fishermen are at the forefront of our thinking as we consider the different options that have been proposed. What is clear is that, when EU rules no longer apply, the UK will be making its own decisions. We will control access to our own waters and we will seek to gain a fairer share of quotas.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and with the Scottish Government about replacing the European maritime and fisheries fund and devolving the equivalent budgets?

Suella Braverman: All European maritime and fisheries fund projects approved before the UK leaves the EU will be fully funded under the Treasury guarantee, even when those projects are not completed by the UK exit date. Work is under way to consider the long-term future of all the programmes that are currently EU funded. Leaving the EU means that we will want to take our own decisions about how to deliver the policy objectives previously supported by EU funding.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): With the Fisheries Bill being presented later this morning, and with the Lowestoft fishing industry coming forward with exciting plans to regenerate the industry, will the Minister reconfirm that in December 2020 the UK will negotiate fishing opportunities for 2021 as an independent coastal state?

Suella Braverman: As I said, we fully expect to be negotiating as an independent coastal state in 2020. Any of the options put forward will take account of all that has been agreed in the draft withdrawal agreement. We have clarified that the UK share of quotas will not change during the implementation period and that the UK can attend international negotiations. I am sure my hon. Friend is aware of the structures that have been agreed to ensure that the UK has a representative voice in those negotiations.

Support for Businesses

13. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses to prepare for the UK leaving the EU. [907271]

22. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses to prepare for the UK leaving the EU. [907282]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): We recognise the importance of a pro-business agenda for Brexit, and we have engaged across the economy on getting a deal that works for business. That includes seeking frictionless trade with EU markets and an implementation period, allowing businesses time to prepare and ensuring only one set of changes.

Justin Madders: Businesses in my constituency are reporting having to pay six-figure sums for Brexit contingency planning. How much of that will they be able to claim back from Government?

Mr Walker: It is vital that both the Government and businesses work together on contingency planning, which is why the Government have published the 106 technical notices. We will continue to work closely with businesses to ensure that they can bring their contingency plans up to form. We will also continue to work on a deal that means those contingency plans do not have to be put into force.

Grahame Morris: Will the Minister elaborate on an earlier answer? The continued success of Nissan is really important to my region. What specific action is he taking to support the manufacturing businesses that operate in the supply chain that supports the Nissan car factory?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the huge importance of our automotive sector. We continue to engage with the automotive sector, both with the big companies and organisations such as the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, and with the supply chain to ensure that we are taking their views on board. Securing frictionless access to the

European market is so important to protecting those supply chains, which of course exist both in the UK and in Europe.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The port of Immingham in my constituency, measured by tonnage, is the largest in the UK. When I meet businesses on the port, they constantly tell me about the opportunities they foresee for Brexit to extend trade through the port. Will the Minister, and the Government as a whole, support them by talking more about the opportunities of Brexit, rather than talking down those opportunities as the Opposition do?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. There are huge global opportunities for the UK as a global trading nation, and ports such as those in his constituency will thrive as the UK pursues global free trade.

Mr Speaker: In the spirit of helpfulness to new Members, may I gently say to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), whom I know wished to come in on the previous question, that with modest guile it would be perfectly possible for him legitimately to shoehorn his inquiry into the current question?

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. As has been said, the Fisheries Bill is to be introduced today. So does my hon. Friend find it as strange as I do that the Scottish National party is leading a delegation to Brussels today to advocate not only staying in the single market and customs union, but, presumably, the common fisheries policy, as well as all the other institutions of the EU in which it is the SNP's policy to remain? Can she confirm that it is this Government's position to stay in none of those institutions?

Mr Speaker: It is now a he, rather than a she, but the thrust of the inquiry stands.

Mr Walker: We are grateful, Mr Speaker. I can absolutely confirm that it is our Government's position to leave the CFP. Having met the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and the Scottish Seafood Association to discuss these issues, I think they would be as shocked at the SNP's position on this as my hon. Friend is.

Second EU Referendum

14. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What the Government's policy is on holding a second referendum on the UK leaving the EU. [907272]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Braverman): After sustained public debate, a clear majority of the electorate voted to leave the EU in June 2016, with the highest number of votes cast for anything in UK electoral history. We must respect both the will of the British people and the democratic process that delivered that result. As such, it is a matter of Government policy that there will not be a second referendum on our exit from the EU.

John Lamont: I am grateful to the Minister for that response. As someone who voted remain in that referendum, I was naturally disappointed by the result. But I am also a democrat, and it is important that we all respect the results of all elections, regardless of whether we win or

lose them. Putting aside the questions on the so-called "people's vote" and what it would actually achieve and deliver, does she not agree that it would undermine fundamental principles of democracy in this country?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend makes his point skilfully. People trusted that their voices would be heard, and to ask the question all over again would be a betrayal of our democracy and of that trust. Whether on Brexit or on Scottish independence, politicians north and south of the border should think twice before they choose to let people down in this way.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): When are this Government going to wake up to the madness of where we are? There is no deal I can see coming from Europe that will look after my constituents better than remaining in the EU. Whether it is through reasserting parliamentary sovereignty or having a second referendum—yes, I was out on the march in Parliament Square on Saturday—can we please have a Government who wake up to their responsibilities and look after the future of this nation?

Suella Braverman: Looking after the future of this nation means respecting the democratic voice of this nation. Yes, 700,000 people marched on Saturday, but 17.4 million people voted to leave, and we do not simply ignore their voices just because we do not like what they said. I ask the hon. Gentleman, who obviously supports a second referendum and, worse still, one that would have remain as an option, to take a long, hard look in the mirror and ask himself whether he can truly call himself a democrat.

Mr Speaker: I should say to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) that I was speaking at a theatre in Colchester last night and I referenced him in the course of my remarks. Knowing that he is not altogether averse to a focus upon himself from time to time, I think he would have enjoyed my observations.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that, if the 2016 referendum is not honoured, a second referendum would have no credibility whatsoever?

Suella Braverman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This is not the best of three. It is not about, "You keep trying until you get the result you want." This was a historic vote, when millions of people put their faith in democracy. To do anything other than revere that vote would undermine democracy and cause a collapse in that faith.

Mr Speaker: I am relieved to see that the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who is a most assiduous attender in the Chamber, has beetled into the Chamber just in time. This is very good news.

No Deal: Other States' Preparations

16. **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to co-operate with other EU states on those countries' preparations for the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [907274]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): We are committed to negotiating a successful exit and, as a responsible Government, we are also preparing for the unlikely scenario in which we leave without a deal, including by co-operating with member states to minimise disruption to citizens and businesses. We will continue to impress on member states our joint responsibility to work together.

Rachel Maclean: Thank you for your patience, Mr Speaker.

Although we do not expect a no-deal scenario, which is clearly not in the interests of anyone, does the Minister agree that it is completely incumbent on EU member states to work with the UK, because it is in their own interests to get a good deal as well?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Member states are playing a key role in ensuring the successful delivery of our exit and in negotiations. We hope to work with them fully in future.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Have the discussions with the Republic of Ireland Government about the possibility of our leaving with no deal next March identified that they would have a clear obligation, enforceable quite quickly through the European Court of Justice, to impose customs and other checks on trade across the border with Northern Ireland?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think the right hon. Gentleman will find that the Irish Government have said that they would not do that.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): In the event of no deal, the EU's free trade agreements will cease to apply to the UK. How many of those 37 free trade agreements have the Government successfully agreed with our partners to retain and carry over in the event of no deal?

Chris Heaton-Harris: We are currently in negotiations with all those individual partners so that we can do exactly that.

Leaving the EU: Devolved Administrations

17. **Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP):** What recent discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations on the negotiations for the UK leaving the EU. [907276]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State holds detailed discussions with the devolved Administrations on the negotiations, through monthly meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations). I co-chair the Ministerial Forum (EU Negotiations), which met most recently on Monday. We had a productive discussion on co-operative accords, including on science, education and culture.

Ronnie Cowan: Has the Secretary of State read the Scottish Government's most recent publication, "Scotland's Place in Europe: Our Way Forward"? Will he pledge to consider the recommendation in the report that staying in the single market and customs union would be best for jobs and the economy?

Mr Walker: I am clear that the Government's position is that we will leave the single market and customs union, but I did receive a delightful bound copy of said report at the ministerial forum and will of course take it away and give it due consideration.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Yesterday, the Russian Federation formally objected to the post-Brexit schedule proposed by the UK at the World Trade Organisation. Unless the Russian veto is removed, if there is no deal, Welsh companies will not be able to trade on WTO terms. What discussions has the Minister had with the Welsh Government about this catastrophic likely outcome for the Welsh economy?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman refers to something that happened yesterday. I understand that the Department for International Trade has already responded and said that such objections at the WTO are not unusual and that it is already taking steps to address them.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Minister knows that I am the vice-chair of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, of which he is a much-missed member. The assembly recently visited the Scottish Parliament, where we were shown the recent report. I have recently been to Wales and BIPA has just had its conference in London. The Minister greatly respects the United Kingdom and its constituent parts, but may I pick up on what the Secretary of State said? It is not good enough to keep on talking to Cabinet colleagues; Brexit is undermining the integrity of the Union. How often has the Secretary of State visited the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland to talk to the people there about how they really feel about the strain in our constitution?

Mr Walker: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her important work with BIPA, of which I was a keen member as a Back Bencher. We take the Union very seriously. The Secretary of State regularly meets representatives of the two devolved Governments and the Northern Ireland civil service at the Joint Ministerial Committee. Although he is relatively new in his role, I am sure that he will visit all four parts of the United Kingdom during the course of his duties.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We are running slightly late, but I want to accommodate the last two questioners.

Leaving the EU: Legislation

18. **Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab):** What estimate he has made of the volume of legislation that would be required in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [907277]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Braverman): We are continuing to put in place the legislative building blocks to deliver our exit, whatever the outcome of the negotiations, including the unlikely event that a deal cannot be agreed. The Government have stated consistently that a wide range of legislation will be required to correct retained EU law and ensure a functioning statute book on exit day.

Examples include the recent Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018, which is now law, and statutory instruments on civil aviation and airports.

Afzal Khan: Greater Manchester has started to draw up plans for the catastrophe of a no-deal Brexit. Council leaders have warned that supermarkets in the north-west do not have warehouse space to stockpile food. Planes from Manchester airport could be grounded. Councils have already faced eight years of austerity, and they will be the ones picking up the pieces after no deal, providing housing and children-and-adult services to people who are out of work because of economic downturn. Will the Minister commit to sharing the Government's no-deal planning with local authorities?

Suella Braverman: The Government take very seriously the concerns of local authorities when it comes to Brexit preparations. I have met local government leaders all over the country to talk about the subject. I am glad that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has set up a Brexit delivery board to co-ordinate the work of local authorities and Government on preparations for Brexit—deal or no deal.

Aerospace Sector

19. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support SMEs in the aerospace sector to prepare for the potential effect on that industry's cash flow of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [907278]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We firmly believe that it is in the interests of both the EU and the UK to strike a deal, but it is the job of a responsible Government to prepare for all scenarios. The UK aerospace industry is a high-growth, high-value sector driven by innovation. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is working with the sector to ensure that the UK continues to be one of the most competitive locations in the world for aerospace.

Jeremy Lefroy: I thank the Minister for that answer. No deal would be extremely serious and damaging for aerospace both in the EU and the UK, so it is vital that we avoid that. In terms of cash flow, I ask him, even if there is a deal, to look very seriously at ensuring that cash flow is available for businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises that are likely to be impacted even by small disruption to their business.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my hon. Friend for his supplementary question. Although there are programmes already in place, including the Sharing in Growth performance improvement programme, I will happily take away the point that he has made and perhaps have a conversation with him about it later.

Topical Questions

T1. [907283] **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): Since I last updated the House, our negotiations with the EU have continued and the withdrawal agreement is now 95% agreed. There is one key outstanding issue, namely the Northern Ireland border. Earlier this week, the Prime Minister set out the proposals that we are discussing with the EU and, as we intensify our negotiations to secure a good deal, we are also expediting preparations for no deal just in case the EU does not match the ambition and the pragmatism that we have demonstrated.

Marsha De Cordova: It is clear that no deal would be a national disaster and the thousands of EU citizens living in Battersea fear that a no-deal Brexit risks causing personal disaster and their rights to be jeopardised. Groups such as the 3 million have called for the citizens' rights section of the withdrawal agreement to be ring-fenced so that there is no change to their rights in the event of a no deal. Why will the Secretary of State not make that commitment?

Dominic Raab: The Prime Minister and I have made the commitment to secure the rights of EU nationals here. We will set out the details very shortly, and we do expect the EU to reciprocate in relation to UK expats abroad.

T2. [907284] **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): No deal will be damaging for both sides, so does my right hon. Friend agree that, in effect, to rule out supporting any agreement that the Prime Minister agrees with 27 other EU states on the basis of contrived tests puts politics before principle and does not serve the national interest?

Dominic Raab: It is a deeply irresponsible approach. I have to say that it is one that the Labour leadership have taken, but it is one that all Members on all sides might have to think about very carefully when we bring back a good deal from the EU.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): The Secretary of State has now published 106 technical notices relating to no deal. The analysis by the Institute for Government shows that, taken together, his own technical notices commit the Government before next March to the creation or expansion of 15 quangos, further legislation in 51 areas, the negotiation of 40 new international agreements either with the EU or other countries, and the introduction of 55 new systems and processes. That is a huge legislative task for any Government, let alone this troubled Government. That is his own analysis. On a scale of one to 10, can the Secretary of State indicate how confident he is that this can all be done in the next 22 weeks?

Dominic Raab: I thank the shadow Brexit Secretary. What he has set out, of course, is the concerted plans and preparations that we are rightly undertaking to make sure that, regardless of the outcome of the negotiations—and we want a good deal—we will be ready to deal with the short-term risk, which there will undoubtedly be, and make a success of Brexit.

Keir Starmer: I notice that I did not get a number between one and 10, and I notice, therefore, that the Secretary of State is not adopting the blind confidence in the face of the fact that his predecessor went in for.

The truth is that it is already too late to plan for no deal. This is bluff not planning. May I ask a very simple question? Why was this legislation not introduced months ago?

Dominic Raab: There has actually been a variety of legislation, including the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which is now in place. The irresponsible thing to do is take the position of the shadow Chancellor, who has said that he would make no financial provision for no deal. That is deeply irresponsible, as it would leave us as a hostage to the negotiations and leave the UK overexposed in the unlikely and regrettable outcome that we do not get a deal with our EU partners.

T4. [907288] **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): Torbay's language colleges are delighted to welcome thousands of students from across Europe each year to enjoy the beautiful bay and to learn English. Will the Minister outline how the needs of that sector have been considered in our negotiations with the EU?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Studying abroad is a great opportunity for many students and we want to ensure that it continues. We have proposed a UK-EU co-operative accord on culture and education for after we leave, allowing British and EU students to continue to visit one another's countries, and study in one another's colleges and universities.

T3. [907286] **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): A number of my constituents—from musicians to those in financial services—regularly travel to Europe for work, and they are worried and anxious about how the arrangements after Brexit will affect their lives and work. Will the Minister assure my constituents that plans for travel will cause no or minimal disruption to their work, and can he tell the House when the plans will be made available for scrutiny?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. In our White Paper, we have set out a labour mobility framework that includes visa-free travel for tourists and short-term business visits. I think that that would address her constituents' points.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Will the Government ensure that our contingency plans reflect what we know of our European partners' contingency plans?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): I thank my hon. Friend for his work on no deal when he was the Minister, and the preparations that have been in place for more than two years. As he will know from his experience in the Department, we closely monitor what our European counterparts are saying. If he were to listen to our French counterparts at this point in time, he would be hearing noises about two-minute checks at the border, not longer. France is employing lots of customs guards to ensure the flow of goods and trade, and will increase the number of border posts at Calais.

T5. [907289] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): To mitigate any possible loss of trade following Brexit, will the Secretary of State lobby Cabinet colleagues to develop the green economy? An increased domestic

demand for items such as electric vehicles that are manufactured in the north-east will help to boost jobs and develop the green economy.

Dominic Raab: Through our White Paper proposals, we are absolutely committed not just to secure and build on our brilliant trading relationship with the EU, but to take advantage of the growth opportunities globally. We are also committed—not just through the EU withdrawal Act, but through the legislation that will be coming forward—to ensuring that we leave the country in an environmentally stronger position for the next generation.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If anyone were to cut up rough at the borders, what is the significance of our being a signatory to the World Trade Organisation trade facilitation agreement?

Dominic Raab: The WTO rules provide some legal checks in relation to discrimination and other aspects, but the reality is that there would be disruption at the border. We can mitigate to a large degree, but not wholly; that will depend on the response from our EU partners and friends. The French, the Belgians and the Dutch are co-operating with us constructively with regard to Eurotunnel. My hon. Friend will have heard what the Minister for no deal planning said about the French approach. We are confident that there would be a constructive approach on both sides in the case of a no-deal scenario, but we do need to prepare for all eventualities.

T6. [907290] **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the protocol and memorandum of understanding for Gibraltar still stand in the event of no deal?

Mr Robin Walker: It has always been the case in these negotiations that we have to agree the whole deal in order for it to apply. It is right to say that we have made a great deal of progress on that protocol, but it is linked to the overall withdrawal agreement.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Witnesses to the Select Committee on Justice on Tuesday stressed the importance of ongoing contractual continuity and certainty of enforcement. That is especially important to the financial services sector, where many of my constituents work. Will the Minister meet me to discuss progress on a number of the important technical aspects around this issue?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He will remember that I answered questions on this topic before his Committee when I was a Justice Minister. These are key aspects of the future relationship, and aspects that we continue to negotiate. We will continue to engage with him and his Committee to ensure that we get the right approach.

T7. [907291] **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Today we learnt that Nigel Farage could be in line for a £150,000 pay-off when we leave the EU. Our Future, Our Choice has produced a report analysing the impact of Brexit on young people, revealing that those aged 18 to 29 could lose £76,000 in earnings by 2050—or even more in a worst-case scenario. With young

people hit hardest by a bad deal, will the Secretary of State agree to meet Our Future, Our Choice to discuss its findings?

Dominic Raab: Any pay-offs to MEPs are obviously a matter for the EU rather than the UK. In relation to young people, we need to be very clear on the benefits of Brexit, both in relation to trade and to the global horizons that will be the USP of this country. In relation to the mobility provisions that allow them to keep studying, travelling and taking advantage of the rich cultural and educational opportunities on the continent, we will engage with all sectors and all stakeholders.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Yesterday, at our evidence session in the Exiting the EU Committee, representatives of Northern Irish businesses made it quite clear that no deal would be really damaging for them and for the people of Northern Ireland. Does that not therefore make it absolutely imperative that the whole question of the Northern Ireland backstop is resolved, and resolved quickly?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is always a very constructive commentator on these issues, and I welcomed my time serving with him on the Brexit Committee. He makes a very important point. We want to see a sensible approach to the bridge between intellectual property and the future relationship; the de-politicisation, frankly, of this issue; and making sure, which is in both sides' interests, that we resolve this issue and get the deal done, which is good news for both sides, and particularly for Northern Ireland.

T8. [907292] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): We now know that the Government are drawing up plans to charter ships to import emergency food and medicines in the event of a no-deal scenario. So what level of lunacy is required before the Government actually wake up to the right solution, which is staying in the EU, the single market and the customs union?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Stockpiling is a part of what the NHS and businesses do already. We will be leaving the European Union successfully on 29 March next year, and we will be getting a deal.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The UK has the world's third-largest aviation industry, yet there are no WTO defaults in the event of no deal. What discussions are taking place to help the aviation industry to plan for all Brexit scenarios?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Braverman): My hon. Friend raises an important issue. He will have seen, no doubt, the technical notices that have been issued relating to the aviation sector, which set out very clearly that we would seek to strike the relevant bilateral agreements to ensure that aviation companies and aeroplanes have access to each other's airspace.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): We hear a lot of fighting talk from the Front Bench, but what attempt are the Government making to heal the terrible divisions that still scar our country, and what attempt are they making to listen to the concerns of remain voters such as mine in Bristol West?

Dominic Raab: It has nothing to do with fighting talk; it is to do with the professionalism and the smart approach we are taking to the negotiations, both on the substance and the detail of our proposals. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) is laughing, but Labour has come up with no serious alternative on the substance. We will continue to make sure that we get the best deal for the country, because that would provide the unifying effect and the healing of the divisions that the hon. Lady refers to.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): When I came back from Berlin during the October holidays, I went through the blue lane rather than the red lane or the green lane at customs. What lane will I use on 30 March next year, on 30 March 2020, and on 30 March 2021?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman can come back through the UK lane.

Mr Speaker: I hope that the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) is now clear about his domestic arrangements for the future. No doubt we will get an update in due course.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Bed manufacturing contributes over £330 million to the UK economy, employing 7,000 people in over 155 companies. In Batley and Spen alone, there are 35 bed manufacturers employing over 1,000 staff. What conversations has the Secretary of State had with bed manufacturers to protect them from a no-deal Brexit?

Dominic Raab: We engage with all sectors and businesses of all kinds, both through the business advisory group, which I have gone and presented to, and the CBI's business committee. We want to make sure that manufacturers like those in the hon. Lady's constituency are protected in a no-deal scenario in relation to their EU trade links, but also their global ones. The best thing she can do is to get behind the Government so that we get the best deal for them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: There are two colleagues bobbing who have not had a question so far. I call Martin Whitfield.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I am grateful, Mr Speaker.

On this sitting day in 1971, by 356 votes to 244, this House voted to join the EEC. Could the Secretary of State give us the benefits of that decision?

Dominic Raab: I am not quite sure of the point that the hon. Gentleman is trying to raise, but I gently suggest to him that life has moved on a little bit since the 1970s, although some on the Labour Front Bench are a bit slow in catching up. We had a referendum in 2016. The British people voted to leave and we are going to get the best deal for them.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): This morning, a family-owned business in my constituency, FreestyleXtreme, announced that it is moving some of its jobs to Bucharest because of uncertainty about Brexit, and particularly the fact that it might be hit by

tariffs after exit day. It warned me several months ago that that move would have to be on the cards. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give to small companies? I can see further businesses taking the same option if they do not get more clarity.

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is right to point to the uncertainty at this moment in time. The best way of alleviating that is for us to get a good deal. The economy is doing well. Youth unemployment is half the level it was in 2010. Wages are rising at the highest level since the financial crash. In terms of businesses voting with confidence in the UK economy, Rolls-Royce, Unilever and Amazon recently announced fresh investment in this country, and that is the reason we should go into these negotiations with economic self-confidence.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, but we must now move on.

Before we hear the urgent question, I wish to make a short statement about the recording of names in the Division list printed in *Hansard* relating to new clause 7,

in the name of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill.

I am sorry to report that there are a large number of errors in that list. Those appear to have been caused by a technological failure. The numbers recorded as voting on either side of the Division are recorded by the Tellers. Those numbers—I hope the House is following me—are correct. Moreover, the names recorded on the Commons voting app—with which all present, I feel sure, will be closely familiar—are also correct. Urgent steps are now being taken to correct the record, and the Clerk Assistant is investigating what went wrong, with a view to taking necessary corrective action. He has asked me to pass on his apology to Members concerned. I cannot identify them individually—that would be a most burdensome and lengthy task—but I hope that they will take this as an apology to all. A revised, corrected list will be printed. I hope that that satisfies the House for now.

Mr Sheerman: It could be the Russians.

Mr Speaker: I am always grateful for the assistance proffered from a sedentary position by the hon. Gentleman.

Nuclear Treaty: US Withdrawal

10.37 am

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the planned US withdrawal from the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty and its implications for UK and European security.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman will have to put up with the Minister of State this morning.

If I may, I will first set out some of the context. The intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty is an agreement signed 31 years ago, in 1987, between the United States and the Soviet Union. The treaty eliminated nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with intermediate ranges. For over three decades, the INF treaty has played a valuable role in supporting Euro-Atlantic security. By removing an entire class of US and Russian weapons, the treaty has contributed to strategic stability and reduced the risk of miscalculation leading to conflict.

Russia's aggressive actions, including the threat and use of force to attain political goals, continue to undermine Euro-Atlantic security and the rules-based international order. Full compliance is essential for the treaty to be effective, yet a pattern of behaviour and information over many years has led to widespread doubts about Russia's compliance. Of course, it was the Obama Administration in 2014 that first strongly called out Russia's non-compliance with this treaty. It is important to remember that this has been a long-running concern for several US Administrations and, indeed, for their European allies.

Alongside NATO allies in July, we made clear that in the absence of any credible answer from Russia on the 9M729 missile, the most plausible assessment would be that Russia was now in violation of the INF treaty. Since then, we have received no credible answer and so judge that Russia is indeed in violation.

In the interests of preserving the treaty, to which we in the UK and I think all our allies in Europe remain fully committed, we urge Russia to address these concerns in a substantial and transparent way, and to come back into full compliance with the treaty. The situation in which only one side—the United States—adheres to the treaty and Russia remains in non-compliance is not sustainable, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree.

It is important to recognise that the US has not yet withdrawn from this treaty. While the treaty remains in force, we shall continue to support it, and in particular to press Russia to return to full and verifiable compliance. Indeed, it is worth noting media reports that Presidents Trump and Putin plan to meet in France next month—on Remembrance Sunday—to discuss this further. May I reassure the hon. Gentleman, and indeed the House at large, that dialogue is ongoing and that we shall remain in close contact with our US and NATO allies?

Fabian Hamilton: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank the Minister for a very helpful reply.

As the Minister said, last week President Trump announced that the United States intends to leave the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty, which was signed by the US and Soviet Russia in 1987. At that time, the threat of nuclear war brought the two great powers together at the negotiation table. The result of those negotiations was the elimination of all short and intermediate-range nuclear missiles, many of which were placed in Europe. Worryingly, however, nuclear war seems more tangible and real today than at any time since Reagan and Gorbachev signed the INF. Yet instead of realising this very real threat and its implications for global peace and security, the United States has apparently decided unilaterally to pull out, offering no alternative proposal or replacement. That is why I very much welcome the Minister's comments.

What we are seeing at the moment is the erosion of the rules-based international order that underpins global peace and security. I must point out that the US was at the forefront of painstakingly creating such a system over the past 70 years. Leaving the INF is a dangerous unravelling of part of the architecture of trust and understanding that has prevented nuclear conflict. That system began exactly 50 years ago with the signing of the non-proliferation treaty, and certainly Labour Members—and, I am sure, those on both sides of the House—strongly support it.

Many experts have concluded that we are now entering a new arms race that has the potential to be more unpredictable and dangerous than at any time during the cold war. Have the UK Government consulted the United States on the implications that an arms race might have for European and United Kingdom security? I ask because this has deep implications for European security. In 1987, Europe was at the epicentre of the cold war and the arms race between Russia and America. Today, events in places such as Ukraine, and even here at home in Salisbury, have shown that Europe is at the forefront of a new conflict between east and west.

Withdrawal from the INF brings back the spectre of Pershing missiles being stationed in Europe and here in the United Kingdom, which I remember vividly from the 1980s. If such a nuclear conflict was to happen between the two major nuclear powers, the UK and our European allies would probably be the first to be hit. Finally, have the Government been given assurances by the United States Administration that we will not see a return of the deployment of short and intermediate-range missiles in Europe?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I know that he and I agree—I hope the whole House would agree—that there is a great worry that there seems to be an erosion of the international rules-based order on which we have relied since the second world war. I think that we all recognise that that order perhaps needs to evolve and adapt to the world we are living in, and we need to engage with as many partners as possible to ensure that that comes to pass.

We have long-standing concerns about Russia's development of a range of new capabilities that stand ready to undermine strategic stability. The US is a responsible nuclear power, with which we work closely. I have twice been to the UN Security Council in the past year for the debates that have taken place on non-proliferation. Interestingly, those debates were held at

the behest of Kazakhstan and other nations that one would not necessarily think of as being immediately concerned about such matters. It is very much the policy to reduce the number of nuclear weapons. We shall continue to work with all partners across the international community to prevent proliferation and to make progress on multilateral nuclear disarmament.

I wish to touch on one other matter that the hon. Gentleman did not mention but is worth commenting on. As he is aware, there is also the bilateral new strategic arms reduction treaty. It was signed in 2011 by the US and Russia, and is designed to expire, under a 10-year process, in 2021. We are very pleased that both sides met limits by the deadline earlier this year, and we welcome the continued implementation of that treaty, which has an important impact on the broader proliferation of nuclear and other weaponry. New START contributes to international stability, and allies have expressed strong support for its continued implementation, and for early and active dialogue on ways to improve strategic stability.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): This week marks the anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis, when the world came to the brink of nuclear war. Clearly the most important issue is that both sides have to come to compliance. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that Russia needs to come to compliance with its obligations under the treaty to make the world safe?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend was alive during the time of the Cuban missile crisis, unlike one or two of us on the Government Benches—and elsewhere I am sure, but I would not wish to be too glib about it.

We absolutely recognise the seriousness of the challenge that lies ahead. Tackling INF is essential for the security of the US and Europe, but we need to ensure that all sides that sign up to such agreements continue to implement them fully. That is where we are at the moment—working with all our allies to get Russia back to the negotiating table and keeping to its obligations.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I was definitely not alive at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, but I have been to eastern Ukraine, and two miles from the contact line with its occupied part, so I am under no illusion about the threat from Russian aggression. The Minister knows that Scottish National party Members have supported the Government on that when required. However, if we believe in the integrity of this vital treaty—the shadow Minister was right to adumbrate its importance—it cannot be the case that we can bring Russia into compliance at the same time as the United States is threatening to depart from it. It therefore follows that we cannot be cheerleaders for the US departing from the treaty. There were somewhat mixed messages—the Minister has partly cleared things up this morning—coming from the Defence Secretary in New York at the tail end of last week, when he stated that we would be with the United States should it choose to leave the INF treaty. I hope the Minister will confirm that the British Government should not take such a position. I would hope that Britain will knock heads together. He will have our support if he chooses to do that, because if the integrity of the treaty is unravelled by President Trump—I am mindful that this is all during an election campaign—we will all be the worse off for it.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his wise comments. It is important to recognise that the US has not yet withdrawn from the treaty, and clearly we are in discussions with all our allies to avoid that outcome, but it is equally important that Russia returns to full and verifiable compliance. It is also worth reflecting, as I did in my comments about New START, on the fact that there are other treaties around. I accept that this issue very much focuses the minds of all of us on the European continent, but other treaties are still being adhered to, and that is a positive starting point in trying to bring both sides together.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is my understanding that it would take six months to withdraw from the treaty under the formal process. Is it effectively the case that we now have a crucial six-month period in which to make some progress in reaching an agreement between Russia, America and ourselves?

Mark Field: I reassure my hon. Friend that we engage routinely with the US on a wide range of foreign policy and security issues, and similarly, this week US officials in Moscow will be talking about a range of issues. There is a timeframe, as my hon. Friend rightly points out. We very much want to adhere to the treaty while it is in place, and in our view it is Russia's responsibility to come to the table and ensure the proper implementation of its obligations.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): President Trump's decision to withdraw unilaterally from hard-won international agreements, including the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal, is cause for concern. I agree with the Minister that states need to honour the commitments they have entered into, but does he agree that it sends a damaging message about the need for international agreements to solve the problems of the world when the United States of America can no longer be relied on to uphold agreements that it freely entered into?

Mark Field: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government also have concerns about the Paris climate change agreement, and we think it greatly to be regretted that the US decided to withdraw from it. I reiterate that it is important to recognise that the US has not yet withdrawn from this treaty, and it is the work of allies—particularly here on the European continent, and not least the big three of the United Kingdom, Germany and France—to try to exert as much pressure as possible in that regard. The easiest way to resolve this matter is to ensure that the bilateral arrangement that has been in place for 31 years is adhered to by one of the parties that is not doing so. In a way, this is frustration boiling over, and as I have pointed out, this is not something new to the Trump Administration; this high-profile issue goes back almost half a decade, including during the Obama Administration.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that the Minister agrees that none of us wants a return to the era of thousands of short and intermediate-range nuclear warhead missile delivery systems in Europe that could potentially be used at a moment's notice to start a world war. Does he agree that when Russia has developed a new missile system that is potentially in breach of this treaty, we must be clear that that treaty will not survive if one party ignores its obligations?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is right and there are very deep-seated concerns, not only for the US but for all allies about Russia's development of new missile systems. Those long-standing concerns are shared by all NATO allies, not least those close to the Russian border. Along with NATO allies, and supported by US efforts, we worked to bring Russia back into compliance as recently as the NATO summit last July.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): One disturbing thing that President Trump added to this conversation was when he said that he is not convinced by the treaty because it does not include China, which is increasing its arsenal. Does that suggest that something in the mind of the President of the United States of America would quite like an escalation of nuclear weaponry? That is something to be abhorred by us all, is it not?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that that is, in part, in the realms of speculation. As Members will know, Russia and the US alone are the countries bound by the treaty, although it obviously impacts on many other countries across the world, especially in Europe. We are engaging, and will continue to engage, with the United States Administration to understand their assessment, although obviously, I, too, have read some of the speculation to which the hon. Gentleman refers. Fundamentally, this treaty concerns Euro-Atlantic security and can be effective only if there is full compliance.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm what specific engagement there has been with representatives from the US Administration and Russian authorities on these matters?

Mark Field: I hope my hon. Friend will recognise that I do not want to get into too many matters of sensitive intelligence regarding verification and other issues. Clearly, lines of communications are open, and not just with the US. One benefit, however frustrating, of the bilateral relationship between the UK and Russia is that we are members of the UN Security Council, and there are opportunities to engage on a regular basis. My hon. Friend should be assured that we will continue to do so.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): There is a continuing undermining of the international order by many nations across the world, including Russia and China. How will the UK Government ensure that upholders of the international order—NATO, the UN, the USA, Britain and Europe—make the case that the person who is also undermining that international order, President Trump, must show an example, or else we cannot make that argument to other countries?

Mark Field: I understand where the hon. Gentleman is coming from on this matter. He wants to criticise the US Administration, but the truth of the matter is that there has been frustration on this issue for over half a decade. We are working closely, and do work closely, with the US to try to ensure nuclear non-proliferation. I agree that it is a matter of great concern that we are living in a world where there are continued threats, from a number of unexpected quarters, towards a rules-based international system that has stood the world in very good stead over the past seven decades. I spend a lot of time in the Foreign Office on this matter. I know that

the new Foreign Secretary feels just as strongly about it and will want to speak very openly about the rules-based system.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), who spoke from the Labour Front Bench, for tabling an urgent question on this matter and you, Mr Speaker, for accepting it? Does the Minister share my concern, however, that in the Labour Front Bencher's comments there was not a breath that was critical of Russia for not complying with the treaty? Does he agree that there is no point in having international treaties unless both signatories adhere to their terms?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, which he asks in his usual robust style. In fairness, I think that the Labour Front Bencher was slightly more even-handed in his approach to the matter than he gives him credit for. It is, however, worth reiterating my hon. Friend's point that ultimately we would not have come to this pass had Russia adhered to its compliance obligations.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Just to be clear, if the INF treaty falls apart that would mean the relocation of short-range and medium-range nuclear missiles on UK soil. The UK Government have not been critical of President Trump's diplomatic moves, so can I take it that they would not stand in the way of the relocation of those missiles on UK soil?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that that is highly speculative and several steps ahead. We are doing our level best to ensure that, for the reasons I have laid out, the INF treaty is not torn up and thrown away. For as long as the treaty remains in force, we shall continue our efforts to bring Russia back into full and verified compliance.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My right hon. Friend referred to the ongoing work on multilateral nuclear disarmament. Will he express what the United Kingdom is doing? It is absolutely vital that far more visible work is done on this globally, in addition to seeking to maintain the other treaties that are a vital stepping stone towards that?

Mark Field: I reassure my hon. Friend that a lot of work does go on. It is often said that the best way to keep matters secret in British public life is to say something about them on the Floor of the House of Commons. Perhaps the floor of the UN Security Council provides the same anonymity. Whenever I go to New York, I am very struck by how many nations, particularly those who are non-permanent members of the UN Security Council, feel as strongly about non-proliferation. We continue to work very closely on it. With all the issues around Democratic People's Republic of Korea that have been at the forefront of people's minds over the past year, there has never been a more important time to make the robust case to which he refers.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Russia's non-compliance with the treaty is very serious, but may I press the Minister on what assurances, with regard to the deployment of short-range and medium-range missiles in Europe, he has gleaned from our US partners?

Mark Field: That is a fair question to ask, but the hon. Gentleman will realise that this is sheer speculation. We are a long way off the idea of having to take assurances about where the siting of any weapons may or may not be. Obviously, one of our biggest concerns is that President Putin's immediate instinct is to come out and make a rather destabilising and uncalled for comment about a further threat in this regard. Our hope is that both parties will return to the table to look at the treaty, but that would require good will, particularly on the Russian side.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The UK has a long and strong interest in this treaty, thanks in no small part to Margaret Thatcher bringing the two sides together. Tempting as it is for some in this place to enter into a little bit of America bashing, will the Minister confirm that it is Russia, not the US, that is in breach of the treaty?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for robustly putting that case. He is absolutely right; the whole issue has come to pass because of Russia's continued and long-standing non-compliance. The truth of the matter is, as I have said, that this is not just an issue for the Trump Administration. Very robust action was taken in 2014 and grave concerns were raised about Russia's failure to adhere to its obligations.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will recall that yesterday was the anniversary of the founding of the United Nations in 1945. In 1945, some real statesmen and women got together and said, "How do we stop these world wars? How do we stop this chaos? How do we stop the killing?" They came up with the United Nations, NATO and the European Coal and Steel Community, which became the European Union. Is it not a fact that we now have to realise what perilous times we are in and find unity in Europe to make a contribution to the peace?

Mark Field: Understandably, we often take the situation for granted. I am the father of a 10-year-old son, and we have perhaps taken for granted the fact that he is the third generation of Field menfolk who have not had to go to war. We should be aware that that is the exception, rather than the rule.

I am a great believer in utilising the strongest possible bilateral and multilateral communications, in diplomacy terms. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that one thing has been very evident in all the discussions since that fateful day in June 2016: when we leave the European Union, we have to work together in security, defence and intelligence. We have focused our minds on that a great deal, and we will continue to do so even when we are outside the European Union.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As recently as this summer, Jon Huntsman, the US ambassador to Russia, described the INF as

"probably the most successful treaty"

in the

"history of arms control".

Does the Minister agree with Jon Huntsman, and, if so, will he make that point to the US and Russian Governments as he meets them?

Mark Field: It is fair to say that although that treaty has particular resonance in Europe, a number of other treaties have come into place since then. There has been a new strategic arms reduction treaty, and constant discussions are taking place to try to secure non-proliferation. The treaty is clearly important in its own terms, but it is a treaty signed between two countries. We would like one of those two countries, which is clearly in breach of it, to come back to the table. Only when that happens can we be sure that the stability that came into place at the signing of the treaty 31 years ago will be maintained.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Regrettably, both Trump and Putin seem committed to tearing up the international rules-based order. What specific initiatives does the Minister anticipate the UK taking with the European Union to bolster the international rules-based order, so that we can ensure that there is a focus on reducing nuclear weapons, but also on tackling other global issues such as climate change?

Mark Field: It is wrong to suggest that America is trying to tear up the international order, although there are perhaps more threats to that order than has hitherto been the case. We will work together in as many international institutions as we can. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that Germany joins the Security Council in January next year for a two-year term, and we anticipate tremendously important work being done between France, Germany and the UK in that forum to try to hold things together.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The problem with the politics of brinkmanship is that it takes people to the brink. Is it not about time the Government used the so-called special relationship to tell President Trump so?

Mark Field: I do not want to reiterate what I have said for the last half hour, but the truth of the matter is that we have reached this point because Russia has persistently and consistently failed to meet its obligations. The important thing is not that we turn our fire in the other direction, but that we work with all our allies—we are united among our NATO allies here in Europe—to ensure that Russia adheres to those obligations.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you know that I am by nature a conviction optimist, but my optimism—and, more importantly, that of my constituents in Bristol West, who turned to me over the weekend for hope and reassurance about the international rules-based order—is being sorely tested. I ask the Minister from the heart: what help can he give me to pass on optimism and hope for a better world?

Mark Field: I am sure the hon. Lady will be glad to hear that I am by nature a glass-half-full person, but these are serious issues. We must continue to talk, and we must continue to make the case internationally, along the lines that she has suggested.

All our NATO allies are totally united on this issue. Their consistent message is that Russia has a key role in preserving the treaty, and it must be made aware of that key role, which we agree has been a very important pillar of the European security agreement. I say to the

[Mark Field]

hon. Lady, “Please do not be pessimistic.” This is one of the things about diplomacy. I know that a lot of it goes on under the radar, but we are working together with all our allies, in this particular space but also generally, where there are other breaches of the rules-based international system.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The INF treaty has been important across the NATO alliance in preventing miscalculation. Across the alliance there has also been concern about Russia’s failure to comply. Can the Minister confirm that advance notice of the American stance was given to the alliance, and that he will press for America to keep members of the alliance up to date and informed about its position in relation to any cancellation of the treaty?

Mark Field: I am happy to confirm that we will do that. I reiterate that the United States is still in the treaty, and we will continue to engage routinely with the widest range of foreign policy and security issues with the United States and, indeed, with other partners in this regard.

Speaker’s Statement

11.6 am

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the business question, I wish to make a few brief remarks.

I am delighted that the House of Commons Commission has decided to support fully the three main recommendations of Dame Laura Cox’s report, namely the removal of the previous complaints procedures that are considered not fit for purpose, the call for an entirely independent process to handle complaints, and the inclusion of historical allegations. I believe that this is an important first step in our root-and-branch reform of the culture of this House.

We need to create an internal movement that looks at everything and everyone, and ensures that we all treat each other with respect. We know that more than 200 people came forward to give their testimonies to help Dame Laura to form her opinions, and we owe it to each and every one of them to get this right. Specifically, I am very keen to see the establishment of an independent body to hear and adjudicate on all allegations of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct as soon as possible. Knowing that there is a safe place—a haven—for staff and Members of Parliament to approach when things go badly wrong should send out the strongest signal yet that we are listening, we have heard, and we are willing to change.

Business of the House

11.7 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 29 OCTOBER—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his Budget statement.

TUESDAY 30 OCTOBER—Continuation of the Budget debate.

WEDNESDAY 31 OCTOBER—Continuation of the Budget debate.

THURSDAY 1 NOVEMBER—Conclusion of the Budget debate, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

FRIDAY 2 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 5 November will include the following:

MONDAY 5 NOVEMBER—A general debate on the Dame Laura Cox report on the bullying and harassment of House of Commons staff, followed by a general debate on road safety.

TUESDAY 6 NOVEMBER—A general debate on the centenary of the armistice.

May I start by sending the very best wishes of the House to Sir Jeremy Heywood, a man whose public service we have been so lucky and thankful to have?

Today we celebrate the coming into force 50 years ago of the Race Relations Act 1965, a critical piece of legislation that made the United Kingdom a better place in which to live and work. As Black History Month enters its final week, we acknowledge the extraordinary contribution to the United Kingdom that is made by all our black and minority ethnic communities. Finally, as we approach the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day, may I draw all colleagues' attention to the concert in Westminster Hall being performed by the Parliament choir and the Bundestag choir at 7.30 pm on 31 October? I plan to attend and hope that many colleagues will be able to join what I am sure will be a fantastic event.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the business—although it is still only for a week and two days. At last week's business questions the Leader of the House said I was complaining when I asked for the dates of the Easter recess, but I am going to try again as she has not announced them, and I do not think that is a very nice way of describing what I asked for—I was just doing my job. Maybe unconsciously the right hon. Lady is irritated by my questions, but this is business questions not business discussions. Members, staff and the House need the dates in order to plan ahead.

I note that there has been no rescheduling of time for the Offensive Weapons Bill. It is a very important Bill: it covers the sale and delivery of corrosive substances, possession of dangerous knives, possession of offensive weapons. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and other hon. Members have consistently asked the Government for action on this to protect the public. The last time the Bill was

scheduled to be discussed the Government put on three statements, and the next time there were two urgent questions and then a statement by the Prime Minister. When will we have the Report stage and Third Reading?

The right hon. Lady mentioned race relations and the anniversary of the passing of the Race Relations Act 1965—by a Labour Government. A point of order was raised yesterday by the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). He said a person was welcomed for lunch on the parliamentary estate; at rallies this person's supporters have been pictured performing Nazi salutes. Will the Leader of the House join me in opposing far-right extremists being invited on to the parliamentary estate? Does the Leader of the House know if he read the behaviour code?

Also last week I asked about the statutory instrument on managing migration on to universal credit, saying it should be taken on the Floor of the House. I have asked for this twice, and the right hon. Lady has not given me a yes or no answer. Can she just say, "Yes it will"? We know how to pray against it; we just need a confirmation and reassurance from her that we can debate it on the Floor of the House.

Again last week I asked about Northamptonshire County Council-owned NEA Properties. The Leader of the House again did not answer the question and say what happened to £1.5 million of public money spent on unspecified projects. Will she ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to update the House?

The Government seem to be profligate with public money and state assets, because apparently the UK equity firm Cerberus misled the Government in the biggest sale of state assets in UK history. The company told the Government it was planning to offer homeowners better mortgage deals before its £13 billion purchase of former Northern Rock mortgages. It has not provided any new mortgages and 65,000 homeowners are still trapped on high interest rates. May we have a statement on the sale of the loan book from UK Asset Resolution, which was set up by the Treasury?

On the EU, can the Leader of the House clarify either now or in a letter to me—and the House—what has actually been agreed in the negotiations? In her statement on Monday, the Prime Minister said that

"95% of the withdrawal agreement and its protocols are now settled."—[*Official Report*, 22 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 47.]

The EU's chief negotiator Michel Barnier said that 90% was resolved. Which is it? The Prime Minister said that the Irish border was still a "considerable sticking point", and the European Parliament Brexit negotiator Guy Verhofstadt agrees, as he said yesterday that "progress is at 0%" until the Irish border issue is solved. The EU offered to convene a special summit in November to help the Prime Minister, but it seems that that has now been withdrawn and that the special summit will now be in December. Do the Government have any idea when Parliament can express its view on the terms of the deal? We also heard from the almost millions of people who took to the streets of London last week to give us their view.

Will the Leader of the House say whether the Finance Bill vote will be in November? Will it be before the vote on the final deal, or after? We need to know because the Procedure Committee has to respond to the letter of the

[Valerie Vaz]

shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), of 23 October in which he asked that the business motion allow for multiple amendments to be tabled, selected and voted on before the main motion. This is a sovereign Parliament, not a supine Parliament.

While the Government's negotiating strategy is in chaos, what are they saying to Sir Paul Nurse and other Nobel prizewinners about the effect on science of our leaving the EU? What are they saying to the CBI, 80% of whose members say that uncertainty has had a great impact on their investment decisions? What are the Government doing following the freedom of information request that revealed that most NHS trusts have made no preparations for Brexit, despite worries about the effect on staffing and the availability of drugs? We could have a statement on this, but better still, could the Government update the sectoral analysis on how much money they are going to give to each sector?

I, too, want to join the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in sending my good wishes to Sir Jeremy Heywood. He has spent 35 years in the civil service as Cabinet Secretary, permanent secretary to two Prime Ministers at No. 10 and, among other jobs, principal private secretary to two Chancellors. His first job in the civil service was as an economic adviser to the Health and Safety Executive. We wish him all the best; we have lost a tremendous amount of institutional knowledge.

I also want to send my good wishes to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray), my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who have all taken a tumble recently. We wish them a speedy recovery.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady that some of our colleagues seem to have been a bit accident prone recently. I would add my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) to that list, and I wish them all a speedy recovery.

The hon. Lady asked for recess dates. As she will be aware, we are rising for the November recess on 6 November and returning on 12 November. We rise for the Christmas recess on 20 December and return on 7 January. We rise at the close of business on Thursday 14 February and return on Monday 25 February. I will give recess dates for the Easter break as soon as I can.

The hon. Lady asked about the Offensive Weapons Bill. The Government have tried twice to debate the next stage of that Bill, but I think all hon. Members will appreciate that there have been some important statements. This week, we had the Prime Minister's statement on the EU Council, and I believe that more than 100 questions were asked of her. We also had an important Government statement on the untimely death of Mr Khashoggi, an absolutely shocking situation that all hon. Members will have wanted to hear about. Mr Speaker also granted two urgent questions, which made it clear that, for the second time, it would not be possible to do justice to the many amendments that Members wanted to discuss within the time agreed by

the House for the debate. Unfortunately, we therefore had to delay that business again, but we will reschedule it as soon as we can.

The hon. Lady mentioned the visit to Parliament of a certain individual. I think that all hon. Members would abhor the comments and views of that individual, but I also think that they would uphold the right to free speech. This is a dilemma, and we all need to be careful about how we address it. Nevertheless, I share the hon. Lady's concern about the views of that individual.

The hon. Lady asked about the statutory instrument on universal credit that is being prayed against by the Opposition. The Government have already scheduled more negative SIs for debate on the Floor of the House than in any Session since 1997. It is a matter of parliamentary convention that, where a reasonable request for a debate has been made, time should be allowed for that debate. I think that we have demonstrated in this Session that the Government are willing to provide time in line with that convention and to accede to reasonable requests made by the Opposition, and we will continue to do so.

The hon. Lady then raised a number of questions that are rightly for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. If she wishes to raise specific points, I can direct them to MHCLG on her behalf, or she can await MHCLG questions. She could also encourage hon. Members who want to have specific questions answered to submit written questions. I am happy to facilitate obtaining those answers for her.

With regard to Brexit, the Prime Minister made it very clear in her statement on the state of the preparations on Monday that there had been extraordinary progress. She also went through a number of areas of concern to the House, such as the outstanding issues on Gibraltar, on EU citizens' rights here and UK citizens' rights in the EU, and on financial payments. There has been a huge amount of progress.

The PM also made it clear that there is a serious sticking point around Northern Ireland and the EU's desire for a backstop whereby Northern Ireland is kept within the customs union. That would lead to a border down the Irish sea, which would be unacceptable to any UK Government—I am sure that all hon. Members would agree with that. There has been great progress, but some sticking points remain.

The hon. Lady mentioned last weekend's march for a second referendum, so it would be interesting if the Opposition made it clear whether they support a second referendum. The Government have made it clear that we absolutely do not support such a move, and we fully intend to respect the view of the people, as expressed in the 2016 referendum.

The hon. Lady asked about the meaningful vote but, as I hoped that I had explained last week, once the deal with the EU has been agreed, Parliament will have a vote on the withdrawal agreement and the terms of our future partnership, and Parliament will have the choice to accept or reject that deal. The House will already be well aware that whether debate ought to be organised through a business of the House motion, and the form of any such motion, will ultimately be in the hands of the House itself, which has the power to amend, approve or reject such a motion.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about the Government's Brexit preparations. I absolutely reassure all hon. Members that the Government are preparing for all eventualities,

including a no-deal Brexit. I sit on a committee that looks at least once a week at different aspects of the no-deal preparations, which are far advanced.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): My constituent Amanda Kopel from Kirriemuir has been a tireless campaigner for Frank's law—which will support thousands across Scotland who are suffering with dementia—after losing her husband Frank to the disease at the age of 65. Amanda is now hosting a fundraising dinner on Saturday at Frank's old football ground, Dundee United's Tannadice Park. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should champion those who give so much to ensure that no one goes through what they have been through? May we have a debate to celebrate people such as Amanda?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate Amanda on a fantastic achievement and wish her great success with the event. My hon. Friend is right to highlight our gratitude for the work of volunteers, fundraisers and campaigners and some of the things that make us one of the most generous countries in the world. Through the Government's "Challenge on Dementia 2020", we are working towards a society in which every person with dementia receives high-quality, compassionate care from diagnosis through to end of life. My parliamentary office staff and I have all undertaken dementia-friendly training in the past couple of weeks, and I recommend it to all hon. Members. It really is a fantastic way for all of us to be more attuned to the needs of those with dementia and their carers.

Mr Speaker: I endorse that call. My own office undertook that training over a year ago—I cannot remember exactly when, but it was well over a year ago—and it is a very good training programme and well worth enjoying—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) does not need to be frivolous about it; it is in fact a serious point.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. It has been a depressing and dispiriting few weeks for those of us who are concerned about workplace bullying in this place, and Dame Laura Cox's report contains a damning litany of the scale of the problem. The Leader of the House has been an effective champion in tackling the problem, and I am glad to see that a debate on Dame Laura's report has been scheduled for a week on Monday.

We know that the report will be implemented in full, but it is time to challenge the ingrained culture of and the power relationships within this House, and an easy start would be to tackle the deference. That means no more "hon. Gentlemen", no more swords, no more spying strangers or segregated areas. For goodness' sake, it should really mean the end of people calling themselves Lords on the parliamentary estate. If we are serious about changing the workplace culture and environment, we must challenge those symbols and power relationships, and I hope that we can include that as part of our ongoing work.

Simply appalling remarks were made in the Scottish Parliament yesterday when the Conservative social security spokesperson, a Ms Michelle Ballantyne, said about the two-child benefit cap:

"It is fair that people on benefits cannot have as many children as they like".—*[Scottish Parliament Official Report, 24 October 2018; c. 52.]*

That comment has shocked and appalled mainstream opinion in Scotland. We do not want those 19th-century Tory Victorian values in Scotland. We want a social security system designed with dignity and respect at its heart. Can we have a debate on further devolution of social security so that the views of people such as Ms Ballantyne hold no sway in our nation?

Lastly, Mr Speaker, we are very grateful to you for allowing MP4 to use Speaker's House tonight for the launch of our new single. We have teamed up with Musicians Against Homelessness and Crisis to draw cross-party attention to homelessness throughout the UK. I do not think we will bother the charts, and we are not seriously considering giving up the day job, but I hope the Leader of the House might be among the first to download the single this evening.

Mr Speaker: MP4 are a great band and, as the hon. Gentleman will recall, they have performed in my constituency—I have very fond memories of that experience. The band have been in Speaker's House before, and I am keen that they should come again and again.

Andrea Leadsom: Mr Speaker, I completely share your enthusiasm for MP4. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) might want to think about a cover version of a well-known song: "You Can't Always Get What You Want". I will leave that thought with him.

I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman: his personal involvement in the establishment of the complaints procedure and his absolute commitment to stamping out bullying and harassment wherever we see it are completely united with those of the entire working group. This was a fantastic piece of cross-party work, and there can be no doubt that all hon. and right hon. Members want to see change in this place.

The hon. Gentleman raises some interesting suggestions, and I have a lot of sympathy for what he says. I am therefore delighted to provide a debate on Monday 5 November so that we can hear from all hon. Members about the changes they want to see. I would prefer to see structural changes, rather than superficial changes to titles—perhaps something a little more deep and meaningful. I hope that on that Monday we will also be able to discuss what structural changes could be made.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the Scottish Parliament and further devolution. Of course funding for the Scottish Government, the block grant, will have grown to more than £31 billion by 2020, a real-terms increase over the current spending review period. It is for the Scottish Government to make some of their own decisions, rather than just looking to the UK Parliament to resolve those issues for them.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on childhood cancers? My constituent Mrs Lorraine Mitchell tragically lost her young, much-loved son Finn in June 2018. The family are still very raw about it and, although they do not wish to blame anyone for his death, they feel there is a lack of awareness of the symptoms of childhood cancer.

Andrea Leadsom: I am so sorry to hear about the loss of Finn. I am sure the whole House will want to send our sincere condolences to Lorraine and her family. Cancer is a terrible disease but, thankfully, survival rates have been improving year on year. For childhood cancers, 82% of children now survive for five years or more, but of course there is so much more to do and that figure will be no consolation to Lorraine and her family.

This month the Prime Minister has made it clear that she is determined to introduce a package of measures to invest in state-of-the-art technology to transform how we diagnose cancers, as well as to boost research and innovation. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) is right that it is also vital to raise awareness among doctors, who often do not expect to see cancers in the very young, so that we do not miss out on early diagnosis.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am also grateful to the Leader of the House for the business statement. I assure her that the Backbench Business Committee is still here and that we have managed to timetable debates in Westminster Hall—they are on today's Order Paper—for 6, 15, 20, 22 and 27 November and 4 December. I remind her that, by the week beginning 12 November, it will have been four parliamentary weeks since the Committee has had any time in the Chamber. I ask her to look favourably on our getting some time in the week beginning 12 November, because we are starting to build up a backlog of unheard debates that require Chamber time for votable motions. I would appreciate her giving that some consideration.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, I am keen to support the Backbench Business Committee. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Standing Orders specify that it is allocated 35 days each Session. So far in this Session more days than that have already been provided—*[Interruption.]* He says it is a longer Session, and I absolutely accept that, but I hope he will appreciate that he was asking for a debate on folic acid, which takes place later on today, and a debate on it being 100 years since the armistice, and that debate is also being provided. So I think that we are aligned on trying to get these debates, but I hear what he is saying and will endeavour to ensure we have time allocated.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): In a world that is frail, faulted and fallen, lives that might otherwise be made brutish, nasty and even short are prevented from being so by our police forces, which stand between us and disorder. Yet, as you know, Mr Speaker, the hot-off-the-press Home Affairs Committee report I have here paints a sorry picture of overstretched police forces, rising rates of crime and fewer people brought to justice. My own county of Lincolnshire is particularly affected, with our force being one of the poorest-funded in the country. The report goes on to say that a fundamental change to the funding formula is required. I hope a Minister might come to the House by order of the Leader of the House to explain to us when an urgent review of the police funding formula is going to take place to benefit counties such as Lincolnshire and others. This is a choice: between chaos and order; between penny pinchers and the people; and between what is easy and what is right.

Andrea Leadsom: We can all enjoy my right hon. Friend's way of putting his question. I would be delighted if I were able to do things by the order of the Leader of the House, but, sadly, that is not really open to me. He might be aware that in December 2017 the Home Office did make it clear that it would revisit plans to change the funding formula at the time of the next spending review. There is a statement from the Home Office to follow this, and indeed we have the Budget debate next week, so he has opportunities to raise this issue. There is some good news: following the 2018-19 police funding settlement, most police and crime commissioners have set out plans to either protect or increase frontline policing next year; and the police workforce has grown by 1% over the past year, following the Government's decision to protect police funding at the 2015 spending review.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): In March, NHS England changed its guidance on conditions for which over-the-counter items should not be routinely prescribed in primary care, with one being head lice. An average bottle of head lice shampoo costs between £10 and £12, which is a significant sum for parents in the most deprived areas. The charity Community Hygiene Concern fears that that decision will lead to an epidemic in schools and communities. Please may we have a debate, in Government time, about the effects of that change in NHS guidance?

Andrea Leadsom: I was not aware of that and I share the hon. Lady's concern; I remember the nightmare of trying to get rid of head lice when my kids were young, and I am sure all hon. Members will have their own horror stories of how persistent head lice are. I am very sympathetic about this, and if she wishes to write to me, I will be able to take it up with the Department of Health and Social Care. Alternatively, I encourage her to put in a written question to see whether she can get an answer directly.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May we have a debate on the 384 bus, so that hon. Members can urge the Mayor and Transport for London to drop their plans to remove this much-valued bus route from many roads in New Barnet?

Andrea Leadsom: We are all big bus fans, although, sadly, I do not think I have ever taken that bus. My right hon. Friend should certainly challenge any reduction in bus services, and I thoroughly recommend that she raises the matter directly with Ministers to see what pressures can be brought to bear on the Mayor.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Leader of the House knows that we produced a report on acquired brain injury recently. One of the new statistics is that about 60% of people going into prison, when they have been properly screened, have had a brain injury; many of them did not know that. In January, we are going to have a brain screening session for all Members of Parliament. I wonder whether she could make a room available so that every Member of Parliament can go through the screening that we would like to see for prisoners.

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his work in this area; he really has brought this issue to the House's attention in a significant way. I absolutely support him in his desire to make that facility available to all Members. From my own passion for early brain development, I know just how profound the effect of the development of the brain and any subsequent brain injury can be on personality, character and outcomes for human beings.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): A key policy currently pursued by Sussex police and crime commissioner, Katy Bourne, is the recruitment of 200 additional officers between now and 2022. May we have a statement from the Home Secretary on the importance of supporting frontline community policing?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to hear my hon. Friend's news about the Sussex PCC's policy. As I mentioned in response to an earlier question, a number of PCCs have decided to increase the number of frontline police officers in their areas. We should pay tribute to all police officers and staff, who do a fantastic job every day to keep us safe. I am glad that Crawley will benefit from more officers on the beat. I encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss with Ministers this issue, and in particular how other areas can benefit from the sensible decision of his local PCC.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): The provision of in vitro fertilisation treatment on the NHS is currently a postcode lottery, with some areas offering an entitlement to three fully funded IVF cycles while others offer just one, and there are areas where people are not offered any at all. May we have a debate in Government time on regional variations in IVF provision and the steps that the Government are taking to ensure that all clinical commissioning groups give this treatment the priority that it deserves, in line with National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this issue. I have had constituents come to me who have had different experiences with one CCG versus another, and who have found for themselves, at the sharp end, that there really is a postcode lottery, so I am really sympathetic to the hon. Lady for pointing this out. I encourage her to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that she and others can talk directly to Ministers about what more can be done to provide fairness and equality for all those who seek IVF support.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): May we have a debate to celebrate the many local fireworks displays that will occur in the next two weeks? Tomorrow evening, the Portgordon fireworks display will put on a spectacular show for people who come from near and far. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Kenny Gunn and his team of volunteers? This year's event is the 25th anniversary of the fantastic show that they put on for the local community.

Andrea Leadsom: I know that my hon. Friend has volunteered at the event for many years, and I understand that everyone who helps out is treated to a feast of stovies or macaroni in the village hall after the display.

I absolutely join him in congratulating Kenny Gunn and all the volunteers for everything that they do to make the event bigger and better every year. Fireworks night has a particular historic resonance for us in Parliament, so it is rather fitting to be talking about it at a time when we could say that the debate here has been quite explosive on a few different fronts.

Chris Bryant: That was terrible! Resign. Instantly. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): As the Leader of the House will no doubt be aware, off-grid gas and heating oils, which are essential in rural communities such as those in the highlands, are unregulated, and there is no way for Ofgem to intervene where there is a monopoly. Will she allow a debate in Government time on the regulation of off-grid fuel and end the great winter rural fuel rip-off?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman, because this is an ongoing problem for those who are off grid. I encourage him to seek a debate, perhaps in Westminster Hall, so that other Members who represent rural areas with similar problems can share their concerns. The Government have made great efforts to try to get people on to the grid and to try to regulate better the prices that are charged, but it is an ongoing problem.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The crisis around Crossrail seems to worsen every single day, with the project delayed by nine months and having overspent by £600 million. Contradictory evidence seems to be being created by the Mayor of London and the Department for Transport, so may we have a Government statement on what is happening to get the project back on track and within budget?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. We have all been concerned to hear of the delays to Crossrail. I encourage him to raise it in the Budget debate next week where he can ask Treasury Ministers exactly what steps can be taken.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Civil Aviation Authority has just published its response to a consultation on flight paths, and it has ignored thousands of my constituents and those in other constituencies by insisting on narrowed flight paths with all the consequences that flow from that. It has also indicated, in an official document, that I did not present to it the petition signed by thousands of my constituents. As I have photographs of me presenting that petition, it means either that it is incompetent or that it is misleading the Government. Either way, it is pretty worrying for all of us. May we have a debate, or at least a statement, on the CAA and flight paths?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the hon. Gentleman's experience. If he wants to write to me, I can take that up with the Department for Transport on his behalf.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I commend the Government for their investment in road infrastructure and their commitment to spend £23 billion by the end of 2020 on improving roads around the country. However, road improvements come with unforeseen consequences. Will my right hon. Friend consider a debate in Government time to discuss the upgrading to smart motorways and the impact that closer running lanes have on existing communities along the line of the motorways?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. Smart motorways increase capacity, reduce congestion and improve the reliability of journey times by making the hard shoulder available as a traffic lane and by using variable speed limits to smooth traffic flow, which, of course, then supports economic growth because there are fewer queues. Almost a billion journeys have been made on smart motorways. In 2017, Highways England completed a three-year study on the M25 that shows that it is as safe as other motorways. However, if she does have specific concerns, I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate about the impact on her own community.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Last week a constituent of mine was tragically murdered outside his home. Yesterday, I held a meeting for the community so that people could voice their concerns, and the community was clear that, for too long, it has been neglected by the local council and by Government. Youth and community services have been cut and police officers taken off our streets. The Home Affairs Committee report today warned that cuts are making policing irrelevant. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss this dire consequence of police cuts?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sorry to hear about the death of the hon. Lady's constituent. All too often, the rise in serious violence, particularly in knife crime, has had terrible consequences for too many people, especially young people. We are determined to tackle this issue, which is why we have introduced a new £40 million serious violence strategy that will help to tackle the changing nature of crime, and we are giving extra powers to the police to tackle knife crime through the Offensive Weapons Bill. We want to reach a place where every member of the public is served by a force that is rated at least good. Currently, nearly a third of forces are not, so standards do need to be raised and be more consistent to keep our communities safe.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Yesterday, the loan charge action group lobbied Parliament. It represent 100,000 families, including those of nurses, doctors, teachers, social workers and contractors. Retrospective taxation by this Government going back 20 years means that many of these families will lose their home and be forced into bankruptcy and, I am afraid, some will commit suicide. That cannot have been the intention of the Government. May we have a statement from the Financial Secretary next week so that we can ask him questions about something that I am sure the Government did not intend to happen?

Andrea Leadsom: I was aware yesterday of a lobby here in Parliament of those affected by the loan charge issue. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise it.

I encourage him to seek an opportunity to raise it during the Budget debate next week where Treasury Ministers will be available, or indeed on 6 November in Treasury questions.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent, Mavis Walton, is 99 years old. In her early years, she worked in munitions, building the bombs that served our country. These canary girls have never had the recognition that they deserve. I am sure that the Leader of the House understands the urgency of this question. With Remembrance Sunday just around the corner, could we have a statement from the relevant Minister, announcing medals for these women? It is the least that they deserve.

Andrea Leadsom: May I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to her constituent on reaching the age of 99, as well as the work she did as one of the canary girls? It is the most amazing story of self-sacrifice and contribution to keeping our nation safe. There is a debate a week on Tuesday—not on the canary girls, but on the Armistice centenary—so the hon. Lady might choose that opportunity to raise this issue more fully, but there will certainly be other chances to pay tribute to all those who gave such great service to our country.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): We have recently returned from a very important—if not tumultuous—meeting of the Council of Europe. Is not it time that we had a debate on the activities and future of the Council of Europe?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has raised this issue with me previously and I am sympathetic to the idea. We have a lot of discussions about Europe at the moment, but I am keen to consider this matter and to give it time when we can.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I think it is true to say that all Members of the House believe that veterans and ex-servicemen and women deserve the very best care that the state can possibly offer, but it would also be true to say that that is just not happening. It is a scandal that the Ministry of Defence does not record suicides among ex-servicemen and women. This happens in many other countries and we should make it happen here. May we have a debate on the issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to ask what more we can do to support our armed forces and the amazing work that they do on our behalf. He will be aware that this Government introduced the armed forces covenant into law to improve support for our armed forces, but he has raised an interesting question that I encourage him to raise directly with Ministers at the next Defence questions.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My right hon. Friend has mentioned the parliamentary concert next week, when the Parliament choir will sing—together with the German Bundestag choir—Mozart's "Mass in C Minor" to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armistice. Perhaps we could have a debate on or consider mentioning—as I am sure you will be at the concert next week, Mr Speaker—the conflict between Britain and Germany

that occurred at the same time in east Africa. I speak as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Tanzania. Hundreds of thousands of Tanganyikans died in the conflict as a result of either the violence or the resulting famine, yet they are hardly ever remembered in these circumstances. It would be a great honour to those people, who gave their lives in a conflict that was nothing to do with them, if we were to remember them as well.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is quite right to mention the appalling events that took place in the great war. Of course, a week on Tuesday we will have a debate on the centenary of the Armistice, which would be a good opportunity to raise all the appalling events and to commemorate the sacrifice of so many right around the world.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): In September, I met London Members of the Youth Parliament to discuss the recommendations of the Youth Violence Commission. I was pleased that they had all read the report and understood the importance of adopting a public health approach. I have to be honest; I worry that too many politicians, including the Home Secretary, bandy around the words and do not really understand them. So, for the third time, has the Leader of the House spoken with the Home Secretary to agree when we will debate this very important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I have written to the Minister concerned seeking advice on the next steps, in response to the hon. Lady's request that I do so. As she will know, there is now a new £22 million early intervention youth fund and a new £3.6 million national county lines co-ordination centre was launched last month. There is a lot more to do and I hope to have an answer for her shortly regarding the next steps.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Last weekend, Ben McAulay from Galashiels in my constituency led a sponsored walk in the borders to thank medical staff from the Royal Hospital for Children in Glasgow who treated him after he was born with a hole in the heart. Ben is just two years old. Will the Government find time to debate the efforts of local fundraisers, and to congratulate Ben and his family, and all those who took part in Toddle Around Tweedbank?

Andrea Leadsom: As always, my hon. Friend raises a really important issue for his constituency. Many of us are aware of the heroic efforts by our constituents to raise money, awareness or support for excellent causes. I am delighted to join him in congratulating Ben, his family, and all those who took part in Toddle Around Tweedbank last week.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the cricketing community at Hanging Heaton cricket club on the edge of my constituency? In the past two years, under the chairmanship of John Carruthers and the captaincy of Gary Fellows, they have won no less than seven trophies, including the Heavy Woollen cup, which is England's oldest competition, and they are the first Yorkshire

team to win the national Twenty20 cup. May we have a debate on the contributions that sporting clubs make in our local communities?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very significant achievement by that cricket club, and I absolutely join her in congratulating it on all its efforts and achievements. She is right to raise the amazing contribution of sports clubs to life in our communities through keeping people fit and outside, where they can enjoy the fresh air and have a bit of fun. I join her in paying tribute to them. She might well like to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can share her experience with Ministers directly.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Last year, three cyclists died on the roads of Lincolnshire and seven children on bicycles were seriously injured. We would all like to see more people cycling—in my flat part of Lincolnshire, it is very easy—so may we have a debate on what more we can do to make cycling safer and more attractive, and also to work on road safety?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government have introduced a £1.2 billion cycling and walking investment strategy to encourage more people to get on their bike or to walk, and also to make roads safer for vulnerable users. We have also invested £7 million in making cycling the natural transport choice in cities right across the UK. That is very important so that we reduce emissions, leaving a cleaner and greener Britain for our children. I absolutely applaud him for raising this important issue. I encourage him to seek a Back-Bench debate, because there are very strong advantages to encouraging more people to get out of their cars and on to the roads on their bicycles, or on to the pavements on their feet.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Leader of the House will have seen reports in the *Yorkshire Post* that for large parts of 2019 and into 2020, east coast main line trains from the north to London will terminate an hour outside London, at Peterborough. This is due to remodelling work at King's Cross station, with another £250 million to be spent on top of the £500 million already spent. In Hull, we are used to timetabling chaos and trains terminating early, and we are certainly not used to money being spent on our station. With major disruption planned for next year and into 2020, may we have a statement from the Transport Secretary about how this will affect all our constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is quite right to raise this issue affecting her constituents. I was not aware of those reports. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate, because it is right that she should raise this issue directly with Transport Ministers.

Kevin Foster (Torquay) (Con): The Debenhams store at the heart of Torquay's harbourside has been an anchor retailer for Torquay for many years, so this morning's news that 50 stores might close will of course be causing considerable concern back in my constituency. May we have a statement on what actions the Government are taking in response to this news, what reassurances they can offer, and what action will be taken to mitigate the consequences in towns where stores do close?

Andrea Leadsom: I realise that this will be a stressful and uncertain time for affected employees. Debenhams has confirmed that it plans to close up to 50 of its stores over the next three to five years following the announcement of the company's preliminary end-of-year results to the stock market. The company has not specified the number of jobs that will be affected or, indeed, which stores will be closed. However, I can certainly confirm that Jobcentre Plus, through the rapid response service, will be ready to support any employee affected by this announcement.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Last week I raised with the Leader of the House the fact that Facebook is only paying £7.4 million in tax. Today, the Information Commissioner has fined Facebook the maximum amount of £500,000 for sharing our data without our consent. The Leader of the House may be aware that the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) and I are leading an inquiry into the impact of social media on people's mental health. Will she find time for a debate on the impact that social media platforms are having on tax, information and public health?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that issue again. The impact of the online harm that is being tolerated by social media giants is a grave concern to the Government. We are working towards the publication this winter of the online harms White Paper, which will set out measures to tackle online harms and clear responsibilities for tech firms to keep citizens safe. Social media firms must take far more responsibility for illegal and harmful content on their platforms, with robust processes in place for removing content—he is absolutely right about that.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): A large number of young people in my constituency have contacted me this week to encourage me to support the private Member's Bill tomorrow on lowering the voting age to 16. Unfortunately, that Bill is 17th on the list and therefore will not be heard. May we have another debate or statement from the Government on their plans to modernise the private Members' Bills system so that such Bills can be debated in the House and voted upon?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have indicated on a number of occasions, we are extremely pleased with the progress of a number of private Members' Bills in the House during this Session. In fact, more private Members' Bills are progressing to Royal Assent than in previous Sessions. Such Bills include some very important measures, such as that which became the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018, as well as the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill and the Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill, which will be considered tomorrow. Some very important private Members' Bills are coming forward, and it is right that the House needs to support those Bills. We continue to look at the process for the consideration of private Members' Bills. I am always happy to look at proposals from the Procedure Committee, and if the hon. Gentleman wants to put forward alternative solutions, I encourage him to speak to the Procedure Committee about them.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): May I add the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) to the list of those who have fallen in the House? He missed the Trafalgar night dinner on Wednesday because of a fall and is no longer fit to do duty here.

May we have a debate on automated gates? They are increasingly being used to provide security in schools, businesses and housing estates, yet no qualification, inspection or registration regime is required for them. They are classed as machinery and are dangerous and hazardous if not correctly installed and maintained, so can that be looked at?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in wishing my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire a speedy recovery. This is an appalling time of year for slips and trips.

The hon. Lady raises an important issue that is certainly worth raising directly with Department for Education Ministers, perhaps in an Adjournment debate, so that we can get a clear picture.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on fuel poverty? The warm homes programme was scrapped in 2010, and the take-up of the energy company obligation grant and loans is very poor. The weather has certainly turned in my constituency. We have had universal credit for a year now, and many people are presenting needing food bank vouchers and fuel vouchers. We need Ministers to come to the House to explain how families can meet the costs of basic essentials while they are pushed below the breadline by changes to universal credit.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to the problem of fuel poverty. We know that "eating or heating" can be a real challenge for families right across the United Kingdom. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this Government have introduced the energy price cap Act to ensure that consumers are not ripped off due to their loyalty to their energy provider. We have also strengthened the energy company obligation to ensure that companies support people who are struggling to meet their heating bills. Since the scheme was launched in 2013, more than one in 16 homes have benefited from over 2.2 million improvements to insulation and so on. We have a target to improve energy efficiency in 2.5 million homes by 2030, and under the warm home discount scheme, more than 2 million low-income and vulnerable households are provided with a £140 rebate off their energy bill each winter.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): One of the Leader of the House's predecessors told this House that English votes for English laws was necessary to eliminate the anomaly whereby Scottish MPs in Westminster can vote on matters affecting England but English MPs cannot do likewise on issues devolved to the Scottish Parliament. He went on to call English votes for English laws England's

"own piece of the devolution settlement".—[*Official Report*, 22 October 2015; Vol. 600, c. 1184.]

Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out her view of Tory MPs representing Scottish constituencies continuing to vote on England-only matters, and also of elected Tory representatives in Scotland viciously and cynically attacking SNP MPs for not voting on England-only matters?

Andrea Leadsom: I entirely agree with the views of my predecessor on the purpose and value of the English votes for English laws changes, which I think have proven to be successful. As to the other point that the

hon. Lady makes, this is the first time that she has raised it with me and I would be very happy to discuss it with her.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Leader of the House has already heard about the news of the Debenhams store closures. May we have a debate about her Government's persistent failure to deal with tax avoidance by online retail giants, which is not just decimating our city centres and high streets, but causing very significant job losses?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady should welcome the fact that the Chancellor made it clear only recently that he will seek to find a means to ensure that online giants pay their fair share of tax. She will appreciate, as I am sure all hon. Members who care about the economy in this country will appreciate, that we do not want to drive online businesses overseas, where they can be subject to cheaper rates. This is therefore an international challenge, and the Chancellor has made clear his determination to resolve it. I am very sympathetic to what she says. Equally, she should pay tribute to the efforts of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which has closed the tax gap considerably and clamped down on tax avoidance and tax evasion since 2010 in a way that was never achieved when the previous Labour Government were in office.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am pleased to hear the statements this morning in support of implementing the Cox report. Anyone who heard Lisette Whittaker's testimony on Sky News yesterday will understand how important it is that this place is seen to clean up its act. I appreciate that the Leader of the House has scheduled some time in a week or two for a debate on this, but it seems to me that if we are to have a truly independent arbitration process—one that has the confidence of both parties and that is seen to be robust—we may well need legislation. Will the Leader of the House commit to securing enough time to implement such legislation during this Session?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman fully appreciates that I cannot stand at the Dispatch Box and determine legislation right now with no thought of either what the House wants to do, or what those we would wish to consult—the victims—would like to happen. However, I can absolutely assure him that I am determined to grasp this awful problem and to stamp out bullying and harassment once and for all, wherever we see it in this place.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My Kilmarnock constituent Maureen Patterson had a number of issues with her employment and support allowance

claim. In her opinion, during one phone call with a decision maker, the person on the phone was rude and disrespectful and used inappropriate language, which upset her. When that was followed up with a complaint, the call could not be checked, because the Department for Work and Pensions does not routinely record outbound calls—we can only guess why. May we therefore have a Government statement about the DWP making a simple procedural change to record all calls, not just incoming ones, to provide protection for vulnerable constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. He could raise it with DWP Ministers directly in a parliamentary question, or if he wants to write to me, I can raise it on his behalf.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Invictus games reminds me of Steve Jones, a former Royal Air Force technician and son of Blaenau Gwent. Steve held the British marathon record for 33 years and won the London, New York, Toronto and Chicago marathons. May we have a Government statement on how we can properly recognise Steve Jones's contribution to world athletics and to public life in south Wales?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that the hon. Gentleman has just neatly paid his own tribute to his constituent. All hon. Members will have great examples of constituents who have contributed enormously to the sporting life of this great country. I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can pay full tribute within the hearing of Ministers.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Fireworks season is upon us, which will bring pleasure to lots of people, but anxiety to our nation's pets. I am campaigning with the Dogs Trust to raise awareness of how people can enjoy fireworks without causing unnecessary anxiety to our animals. May we have a debate in Government time about how we can best do this?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Gentleman can hear he has a lot of support from right across the House. We all like a good fireworks night but, of course, it is a real problem for pets and a real challenge to ensure that we do not cause harm, damage and fear to the nation's pets. He is absolutely right to raise this point. I would encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate so that he can make his thoughts clear, as I am sure he would have a lot of support.

Immigration: DNA Tests

12.6 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the use of DNA evidence in immigration applications.

Many thousands of immigration applications are received every year that involve people applying to come to, or remain in, the UK on the basis of a family relationship with somebody who is already here. If an individual does not have sufficient evidence to show that they are related to someone in the UK, they sometimes choose to take a DNA test to prove the relationship. Officials then consider this evidence as part of their claim. Very often, it will be to the advantage of the applicant because it can establish family relationships beyond doubt where the other available evidence is sometimes insufficient.

The provision of DNA evidence must, however, be entirely voluntary. At the end of June, it was brought to our attention that there were some immigration cases where the provision of DNA evidence had been made a requirement for the issuance of a visa or the granting of leave to remain, and not simply a request. Such demands are unacceptable. I want to take this opportunity to apologise to those affected by this practice. In this context, the law states that the provision of DNA evidence should always be voluntary and never mandatory. My predecessor made that absolutely clear when she brought in changes in 2014.

Once we were made aware of the issue, we immediately commissioned an urgent internal review, which I am publishing today. Copies will be available in the Library. My right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister will also be writing today to the Home Affairs Committee to outline the key points of the review and to provide a copy. The review covered the legal aspects of DNA use, policy and guidance, caseworking practice and correspondence with applicants, as well as oversight arrangements relating to the use of DNA. It outlines a number of areas in which guidance was unclear or wrong. It also outlines areas of operational practice where DNA evidence was improperly required and provides some initial information on the possible scale of the issue. The review makes a number of recommendations about how to address the root causes within the border, immigration and citizenship system that led to this operational practice.

This review is not, however, a conclusion to the work. The numbers and information in the report have been collected at pace and still need to be fully assured and are subject to change. Further work is needed to ascertain the full scope of the issue. Regardless of the number of people affected, one case is still one too many, and I am determined to get to the bottom of how and why in some cases people could be compelled to supply DNA evidence in the first place.

The majority of cases identified so far have been part of Operation Fugal, which, according to the report, started in April 2016 to address patterns of fraud in some specific family and human rights immigration applications. Letters sent as part of that operation incorrectly stated that the applicant must provide DNA evidence and that not providing such information

without a reasonable excuse would lead to the application being refused on suitability grounds. It has been reported that 83 applications had been refused at the time the report was written, and seven of those seem to have been refused on suitability grounds due solely to a failure to provide DNA evidence. A further six appear to have been refused on suitability grounds for failure to provide DNA evidence, although that was not the sole reason.

In addition to Operation Fugal, we have identified an improper approach to the use of DNA evidence in two further areas. The first relates to adult dependent relatives of Gurkhas. In January 2015, a scheme was expanded to allow adult dependent children of Gurkhas who were discharged before 1997 to settle in the UK. Published guidance stated that DNA evidence may be required and that applications may be refused if that evidence was not provided without a reasonable excuse within four weeks. That published guidance was wrong and has now been updated. The report suggests that 51 cases were identified where DNA evidence was requested from applicants at their own cost. At the time the report was written, we were aware of four cases from the same family unit whose application was refused solely because they did not provide DNA evidence. Those decisions have now been corrected.

The second case relates to Afghan nationals. In 2013, applications to resettle in the UK from Afghan nationals who were formerly employed by the UK Government began to be accepted. The terms of the scheme included mandatory DNA testing for family groups, paid for by the UK Government. Current investigations suggest that no one making an application under that scheme was refused because they did not take a DNA test. None the less, mandatory testing should not have been part of the scheme, and that requirement has now been removed.

Let me be clear: across our immigration system, no one should have faced a demand to supply DNA evidence, and no one should have been penalised for not providing it. In particular, I extend my apologies to those Gurkhas and Afghans who have been affected. The two schemes I have described were put in place to help the families of those who have served to keep our country safe, and I am sorry that demands were made of them that never should have been made.

I reassure the House that I am taking action to correct the situation. First, I have given clear instructions that officials must not seek DNA evidence on a mandatory basis in any immigration case. Secondly, I have set up a new taskforce so that anyone who feels that their case may have been influenced in any way by an inappropriate demand for DNA testing can get advice and support. Thirdly, we will be looking to reimburse any individual who has suffered financial loss because we required DNA evidence when we should not have done so. Fourthly, we will continue closely to examine whether this approach might have been taken in any other parts of the immigration system. So far we know that three cohorts have been affected, but we must investigate whether there are any more. I will be asking for independent assurance on everything we do as we establish the facts. Finally, I know that the immigration system is operated by many highly committed people, but we must ensure that the structures and processes they use are fit for the

modern world and fit for the new immigration system that we will be bringing in after we leave the European Union.

I will review more broadly our structures and processes to ensure that they deliver a system in a way that is fair and humane. I will now consider what form that review will take, but my starting point is that it would be helpful to have independent oversight. The review will also need to build on the lessons learned from the Wendy Williams review, and I will want Wendy to play a full part in this wider exercise.

When I became Home Secretary, I made clear that I would be prepared to take action to put right any wrongs as and when I became aware of them. Today, I promise the House that I will get to the bottom of what has gone on in relation to DNA evidence, and I will build an immigration system that provides control but that is also fair, humane and fully compliant with the law.

12.15 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for prior sight of his statement on the improper use of DNA evidence. He will be aware that all our constituents, including those of immigrant descent, want an immigration system that is robust, but they also want it to be fair. The widespread public response to the Windrush scandal tells us how seriously the general public take the question of fairness in our immigration system.

We now know from the Home Secretary's statement that the mandatory provision of DNA was neither legal nor fair. He stated that under the law, DNA evidence must always be provided on a voluntary basis. Can he therefore clarify that the demand for DNA evidence was, in itself, illegal, and if so, what legal consequences will follow? Members across the House will no doubt be shocked to learn that among the first victims of this abuse were Gurkhas and Afghans—men and women who put their lives at risk to keep this country safe. Ministers must clarify how long this practice has been taking place, and under what internal Home Office regime it was allowed or encouraged and at what level.

The Home Secretary spoke about reviewing the current structure and processes of our immigration system, which I welcome. He will be aware that the Law Society has said that there are serious flaws in the immigration system, and one indicator of those flaws is the state of appeals. In the last year for which we have records, fully 50% of appeals were upheld, which is an indicator of a system that is internally flawed. Waiting times for immigration appeals have risen by 45%. The Home Secretary talks about independent oversight, but what more effective oversight is there than a system of appeals that is speedy and that works?

Finally, I remind the Home Secretary that the visa and immigration service faces what will possibly be the biggest single influx of applications in its history when EU nationals who live in the UK seek to settle their status post Brexit. It is a matter of urgency that we put in place processes and structures that can guarantee a speedy, efficient and fair resolution of cases.

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments. She asks a number of reasonable and sensible questions to which I will reply. She started by saying

that the immigration system must be robust—we all agree with that, absolutely—and that it must also be fair. The issue I have brought to the House today is of concern to us all and something that, at least in this regard, is not fair. As I said at the start, this should not have happened, and there should not have been any request in any immigration case, whether family related or not, for mandatory DNA evidence.

The right hon. Lady asked me to make it clear that this is illegal. My understanding is that the Home Office has never had the express power to require anyone to give DNA. It has never had that express power. There have been a number of Acts over time that have referred to this and tried to make it clear. As I mentioned in my statement, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was, when she was Home Secretary, the first Home Secretary to put it completely beyond doubt by amending an Act—I think a 2007 Act—and then again in 2014 to make it absolutely clear in law. As I say, the Home Office has never had the power to compel anyone to provide DNA evidence.

The right hon. Lady will know that we want to have a further review to look into this much more deeply and wanted independent assurance of that. She may be interested to know that we are finding practices, in the cases to which I have already referred, that might go back further. For example, in 2009 two pilots were established by the then Government: the familial testing pilot, which used DNA evidence to verify a child's biological connection with a family during asylum screening; and the human provenance pilot, which used DNA testing and a technique called isotope analysis to attempt to establish whether asylum applicants were from the country of origin that they had claimed. It is therefore important that we have a review that is thorough and goes back as long as it needs to, because, as I say, the Home Office has never had the power to compel people to supply DNA evidence.

The right hon. Lady referred to the broader review of structures and processes. I thank her for welcoming that. She referred to work that has already been done by the Law Society on part of the structures and processes in the immigration system. I have a great regard for the Law Society, which does just this type of work. It is just the kind of organisation we should be listening to.

The right hon. Lady also referred to the appeals process. There have, over recent years, been a number of changes to the appeals process which I think make it fairer, but she is right to raise this issue. This is clearly a very important part of the immigration system, making sure it is fair and that people feel they have had the right to make their case properly and the right to have a person take a second independent look at their case. There is work to be done there.

Finally, the right hon. Lady referred to the EU settlement scheme, which again she is right to refer to. It is a big and ambitious scheme which, over a relatively short period of time, is designed for 3.5 million European citizens. We want them to stay in our country. Whether there is a deal or no deal, we have been very clear that we want them to stay and we want to make that as easy as possible. I do not doubt how ambitious that is. The Home Office has dedicated a significant amount of resources to it and there is significant oversight of the scheme. I can tell her that the reports from the beta testing that has taken place so far, on a limited number

[Sajid Javid]

of cases in their thousands, have been very encouraging. If I remember correctly, I think most people found that they could register in about 20 minutes through the app system that has been developed. Approximately over 90% of people asked how they found the process said that it was very straightforward and easy to use, but she is right to raise this issue. It is one of those things we all need to get right.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I welcome the review and the recognition that the provision of samples should be on a voluntary basis. However, does the Home Secretary agree that firm immigration control is important and that providing this sort of evidence is a way for an applicant to have their application dealt with in a speedy way? It is good evidence and a very useful thing. I do not know whether he would like to clarify that, because it seems to me that, yes, it should not be mandatory, but it is a very good thing and often in the interests of the applicant.

Sajid Javid: My right hon. and learned Friend makes a good point. First and foremost, it is worth stating again that it should never be mandatory to supply DNA evidence. He is right to point out that where individuals feel it can help their case and want to submit DNA evidence voluntarily we should always be open to that. He is also right to say that in many, many cases it helps individuals to make their application and get exactly what they want.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for advance sight of the statement, although when I saw the title "Immigration" I hoped perhaps he was coming to provide a more detailed answer to my question to the Prime Minister yesterday about the crisis in the visa system. But then the Home Secretary has his fair share of crises to choose from.

The Scottish National party accepts that from time to time DNA can be a fair and useful tool in processing immigration applications, but it is clear now that it has become dangerously and unethically overused by the Home Office, making life unnecessarily difficult for applicants. We have seen: children who already have British passports being asked for DNA when trying to renew them; other kids being asked for a new test, even though it had already been provided; and, the root of today's statement, people receiving demands for their DNA even though the guidance said that alternative proof was perfectly acceptable. This is another example of the Home Office being out of control and the result of a migration target with which they are still completely obsessed. It is more evidence that the hostile environment lives on.

We welcome the clarity that it is absolutely not and never will be mandatory for DNA testing, and we welcome the apology that has been offered. Will the Home Secretary confirm that it is now policy that acceptance of the relationship by Government for a different purpose, such as child support, will be sufficient for immigration purposes? Is it the case that if the relationship is accepted for one immigration or nationality purpose, it will not subsequently be challenged unless there are exceptional reasons? Is there guidance on how to handle unexpected DNA results? I understand there

used to be publicly available guidance about what happened if a DNA test showed that the biological father was not the presumed father. Where is that guidance, and will it be released and updated?

Finally, sometimes DNA can be the only means of proving a relationship in refugee family applications and Dublin III applications. Such tests used to be funded by the Home Office for family reunion, as many refugee families are destitute. Why not return to that position if the Government are genuinely keen to pursue a humane approach? Of course, they could also do that by adopting the private Member's Bill on family reunion promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil).

Sajid Javid: First of all, the hon. Gentleman refers to DNA testing with regard to the immigration system being overused. I would just caution him. As I said in my statement, more work needs to be done to see how widespread what should not have happened, the mandatory use, was. In many cases, it is voluntary. I hope the hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that it should not even be allowed in voluntary cases. [Interruption.] No, he is not. Clearly, where an individual feels it would help their application, I think it is right and proper that the Home Office takes that into account. But let me be clear: where it has been mandatory that it is not acceptable. That should not have happened.

The hon. Gentleman asked about other parts of Government, in particular the Department for Work and Pensions, and, where there is voluntary testing, whether it can be used between Departments. I am happy to take that to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and I will make sure that the hon. Gentleman gets a response on that.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the funding of DNA tests and whether there is help with funding. The key point is that if a DNA test is funded by the Government, for whatever circumstances, it should only be in a case where it is voluntary, not mandatory.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for rapidly coming to the House and giving us this statement, which sets out a clear plan of action for how to deal with what may arise. The immigration system is highly complex. I look forward to the Government, when they come forward with the immigration Bill, setting out something new, transparent and workable, and which, with sufficient training, will keep our borders safe.

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right to point out that the immigration system is highly complex. We have seen evidence today of where it can sometimes go wrong. We should not let that take away from the fact that it successfully processes tens of thousands of applications each year, with lots of hardworking people in the Home Office doing a stellar job. When it goes wrong, however, we need to react. He is right to link this with the new immigration system, which we will introduce after we leave the EU. This is a further lesson on how we can simplify it, maintaining control while also making it fairer and more compassionate.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The contents of the Home Secretary's statement are shocking and may have had a devastating impact on

families' lives. It would be helpful to know whether everyone affected has been contacted. I welcome the Home Secretary's approach but, given that this comes after the Windrush crisis, he will recognise that it means that things have gone badly wrong in the Home Office. So that we can pursue the matter, will he ensure that the full Alex Allan review is sent to the Select Committee? Will the Secretary of State ensure that the review that he has rightly set up is wide enough to include the impact of Government targets, such as the net migration target, on decisions that may have been made on a casework basis?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments and for her work as Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, which rightly provides scrutiny of such issues. I hope that we have the opportunity to discuss the matter further at the Committee. As I have said, alongside the report that has already been done on this, we will be writing to the Select Committee today with further information that will be published for the whole House.

The right hon. Lady brought up the Windrush scandal, in which, as we now know, many people were wrongly treated. There is ongoing work in terms of lessons to learn from that. As I mentioned in my statement, the work that is being done independently, especially by Wendy Williams, is an important part of the wider review of structures and processes. In relation to Windrush, the right hon. Lady mentioned the Alex Allan review. The Cabinet Secretary is considering that issue, and we will shortly proceed with what we can and cannot publish on that.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Home Secretary spoke with alacrity and clarity about the need to get the system right and, in the words of the shadow Home Secretary, to make sure that it is both fair and robust. To that end, it is important that people who choose to offer DNA should be encouraged to do so, if it speeds up their cases. All of us across this Chamber have dealt with cases in which there have been long delays and people have been left in almost endless limbo. The voluntary provision of DNA might be a helpful tool for dealing with that. I hope that the Home Secretary will look at that in the review that he is about to carry out.

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. It is good to remind the House that my statement was about the wrongful mandatory use of DNA evidence; as he says, DNA evidence can be a very helpful tool when it is completely voluntary. I understand that the Home Office has, in some cases, helped individuals to do that on an absolutely voluntary basis, because the provision of such evidence can help people, especially if they are in particularly distressing or difficult situations or they are otherwise vulnerable. I think it is helpful to point out that when someone chooses to provide DNA evidence, and it is purely their choice, that should be taken into account.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement, and particularly for his tone and apology. Is it not the case, however, that the DNA scandal suggests that the Home Office's hostile environment policy pushed officials to break the law?

Will his structure review consider a root-and-branch reform of this nasty culture and consider giving the processing of immigration and asylum applications to a new unit that is independent from the Home Office—a unit that can ignore political pressures and simply work efficiently, fairly and lawfully?

Sajid Javid: I think the right hon. Gentleman meant to refer to a compliant environment. That is an environment in which we make sure, on behalf of British citizens, that we have a robust immigration policy that is fair to people, but that enables us to be strong on those who set out to abuse our immigration system and enter or settle in our country illegally—for example, in fraudulent cases—not least to be fair to those who use legal routes for migration to or settlement in the UK.

It is worth reminding the right hon. Gentleman that for five years he was part of a Government that worked on compliant environment policies, which began many years before that with previous Governments. He now appears to have a problem with some of those policies, but I do not remember him raising them when I sat alongside him in Cabinet. That said, there absolutely are lessons to learn from this. We must conduct the right review, with independent oversight, and learn those lessons.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Unlike the vast majority of my colleagues in this Chamber, I am an immigrant to this country. I am proud to be the first Polish-born British Member of Parliament. When I came here in 1978, if the state had asked me for a DNA sample, I would have had no problems whatsoever with providing that. I disagree fundamentally with the Secretary of State, and I do not understand why he is apologising. Does he have the full support of the Cabinet for his statement? What is the matter with the United Kingdom asking for a DNA sample when somebody comes to this country and seeks to become a British citizen?

Sajid Javid: Let me take my hon. Friend's question in two parts. First, he pointed out that he is an immigrant. I love immigrants who have settled in our country, and that includes him. On his second point, whether or not he thinks we should mandate the provision of DNA—he is entitled to his own view on that—the law does not allow us to mandate it, and that is why I am apologising.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary confirm that, where the Home Office holds DNA evidence that it did not obtain lawfully, and that it should not have obtained, the evidence will be deleted from its records?

Sajid Javid: That is another good question. I wish I could confirm whether the Home Office does or does not hold such evidence and if it does, to what extent, but I do not have answers to all the questions. When I have the answers and they have been independently looked at, I will be very happy to come back to the hon. Lady and give her a proper response.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Can the Home Secretary confirm that, where there is other proof of parentage—for example, a birth certificate—a DNA test, even if provided on a voluntary basis, will not be requested?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to confirm that for my hon. Friend. It is worth highlighting that applicants who voluntarily provide DNA often do so because they are in conflict zones, because they are from countries where records have been destroyed or have become unreliable, or because they have become refugees and can no longer access their records. In such a case, someone may voluntarily offer DNA, which can provide a quick way of determining the facts and helping that person.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In his statement, the Home Secretary said that the matter was brought to Ministers' attention at the end of June. I very much welcome the statement, but I wonder whether Ministers asked questions of officials at any point to reassure themselves that DNA samples and evidence were being used appropriately.

Sajid Javid: As I understand it, the matter was originally brought to Ministers' attention by a question from the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), who is on the Opposition Front Bench. I believe he had concerns as a result of a constituency case and he tabled a written question, to which the Minister for Immigration responded, about Government policy. As I have said today, it has never been Government policy to request DNA mandatorily. The question prompted further investigation, and within days of the matter being brought to the Minister's attention an internal review was launched. We now have the outcome of that first review, but, as I have said, it is not the conclusion of this. We need more answers.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How many immigration applications are made each year on the basis of a family relationship, and in what proportion is DNA voluntarily supplied? Presumably, the Home Secretary has been given that information. Will he share it with the House?

Sajid Javid: That is a good question. I do not have the information at hand, but I would be very happy to write to my hon. Friend.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My constituent Maria, who has dual nationality, has been resident—indeed, a teacher—in the UK for 41 years and has been married to a UK national for as long as I have been alive, but she is unable to obtain a UK passport in her married name, by which she has been known in this country for four decades. She has been told that, if she changes back to her name of 40 years ago, she may be able to obtain a passport. Will the Home Secretary look at her case, and exercise some of the common sense that has been lacking thus far?

Sajid Javid: I have listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman has said about his constituent's situation. If he sends me further information, I shall be happy to take a look.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Former Gurkha soldiers who served in our armed forces deserve the very best treatment. Specifically, what new speedier systems will be established to support those brave families better in the future?

Sajid Javid: It is worth our reminding ourselves that the Gurkhas have been an integral part of our British armed forces for more than 200 years. We owe them—the Gurkhas who are in Britain and the Gurkhas who are not, and their predecessors—immense gratitude for everything that they have done to help our country. That is precisely why a scheme was already in place, before the DNA issue arose, to help Gurkhas to settle in the UK if they chose to do so. We have discovered through the review that was carried out that when the scheme was expanded to allow even more Gurkhas—and the adult dependent children of Gurkhas who were already here—to settle, some were improperly asked to provide DNA, and, indeed, told that they must do so. In the cases of which I am currently aware in which that was done and visas were refused, we have corrected the position and the visas have been issued, but at this point I cannot tell the House that those are the only cases, because there is a further review to be conducted.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's determination to improve the immigration system. The use of DNA evidence is an important tool, but it is clearly not mandatory under the law. Will my right hon. Friend reassure the significant number of Gurkha veterans and their families who reside in my constituency that he will continue to ensure that all outstanding cases, and those not yet identified, are dealt with expeditiously and in a way that is sympathetic to the people involved, and that those who have been affected will be compensated?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to give my hon. Friend some assurances on just that issue. The cases at which we are currently looking, particularly those involving Gurkhas, will be dealt with expeditiously, as he has requested, and there will be no mandatory requirement for DNA evidence. Should people wish to provide it, that is entirely up to them, and of course it will be considered. As I said in my statement, we are looking at ways of reimbursing those who may have had to spend money on DNA tests.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The doctrine of ministerial responsibility makes it clear that Ministers are responsible for what goes wrong in their Departments even if they knew nothing about it. I appreciate that the Home Secretary has taken that to heart today, and has come to the House to apologise. There is also a long-standing convention that, when something goes badly wrong in a Department—and surely acting illegally is pretty badly wrong—the only honourable course for the Minister is to resign. Does that doctrine still apply in the Home Office today?

Sajid Javid: I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would be interested in helping to sort things out when they go wrong. That would be the way in which to try to help his constituents if they were caught in something like this. However, it is appropriate that, as we do further work and carry out a review, we look into the chronology of all this and how far it goes back. I have asked officials to establish the exact chronology of events, and to find out what advice was given to what Ministers and when.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Mandatory DNA testing is not only illegal but unethical, and it can put lives at risk. I therefore welcome the statement, but does my right hon. Friend agree that in building a fair and humane system, we must also recognise the importance of the confidentiality of medical records? Will he look at a letter that I received from NHS Digital on 22 October, in my capacity as Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, expressing concern about revised guidance that followed assurances given in the House about the importance of confidentiality earlier this year?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend speaks with experience of these issues, and I strongly agree with her that mandatory DNA testing is not only unlawful but unethical. She raised the issue of confidentiality and mentioned a letter that she was sent as Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. I should be happy to look at that and to respond to her fully.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary has outlined a shocking and illegal breach of trust on the part of Home Office and immigration officials. He will, of course, be aware that the Home Office is the only Department of its kind in Europe that operates an arbitrary and non-limited form of detention. Under that system, 27,000 people were detained last year, 50% of whom were subsequently released. They included one of my constituents, Duc Nguyen, a Vietnamese national who is a victim of human trafficking and human slavery. It is against Home Office protocols to detain such people. Will the Home Secretary undertake to investigate whether coercive DNA-gathering practices have been taking place in detention centres under the Home Office?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman states that we have an “arbitrary” approach to detention; I strongly rebut that—we do not have such an approach. He should know that when anyone is detained, there must be a reasonable prospect of removal within a reasonable time. In recognising that improvements could nevertheless be made to our detention system, we commissioned the Shaw review, and as the hon. Gentleman may recall, I came to the House not so long ago to respond to the review and accepted many of its recommendations.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Having repeated his commitment to improving the fairness and humanity of the immigration system, will my right hon. Friend pay particular attention to the system of visit visas, which causes so much misery, so often, to thousands of British people just because their families happen to be outside the European Union?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend raises an important point. As we define and set up a new immigration system when we leave the EU, we shall have much broader scope and opportunities to improve that situation.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Immigration cases are often complex, and I thank the Home Office and its team for the sensitive and timely manner in which they have dealt with a number of cases that have crossed my desk recently. I also thank my right hon. Friend for the wider review of the immigration system. Surely what is most important is that we get the structures right so that fast and clear decisions can be made when necessary.

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. She is absolutely right about the importance of that wider review of the structures and processes. She refers to cases that she has had to bring to the attention of Ministers. Although it seems from what she said that those have been resolved, Members should not feel that they must keep bringing cases to Ministers’ attention. I should like to see a system in which the vast majority of cases are sorted out properly in the first place, and that is the kind of system that I am trying to build.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I welcome the comprehensive review of the immigration system that the Home Secretary has announced. In that fair and humane spirit, will he incorporate the provisions of my British Indian Ocean Territory (Citizenship) Bill, which is on the Order Paper for consideration tomorrow, in the provisions of the new nationality legislation? They would give British citizenship to people descended from British subjects who were forcibly removed from the Chagos Islands in the late 1960s.

Sajid Javid: I commend my hon. Friend for spotting this opportunity. He has brought forward a Bill that I know that he has thought long and hard about, and we have discussed it. It might be helpful—if he feels that it would be helpful—for him to have a meeting with the Immigration Minister to discuss the matter further.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): The Home Secretary has mentioned ensuring that we have fairness in our immigration system. Fairness also means dealing with abuse of the system, particularly through the use of fraudulent documentation. When I was a Minister, I was struck by the increasing complexity of fraudulent cases, particularly those that the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency was investigating in Swansea. Will the Home Secretary give an assessment of the extent of fraudulent documentation in the immigration system and tell us what the Home Office is doing to tackle it?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to point that out. Everyone wants a fair and compassionate system, but they also want that system to be robust and for the rules to be enforced. If someone tries to take advantage of the system, clearly that must be pursued. I referred in my statement to Operation Fugal, and I understand that one reason why it was begun was that a pattern of fraud was recognised by Home Office officials. When many of those cases were investigated by the police, the Crown Prosecution Service brought charges against individuals. I will not talk about those particular cases, for obvious reasons, but that helps to demonstrate that when people are engaging in wrongdoing, we will pursue that.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend’s leadership and the robust steps he is taking, but can he confirm whether there are any known outstanding cases? If so, will the processing of them be expedited?

Sajid Javid: There may be some known cases that are outstanding and we are expediting them. Operation Fugal addresses some complex cases involving DNA that might have been mandatorily required and that need further investigation, but we will try to deal with those within days when we can.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): My right hon. Friend alluded in his statement to guidance that was unclear or wrong. Can he assure the House that guidance for the new immigration system that will be put in place as we leave the EU will be correct and clear?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I am happy to give that assurance, and it is a perfectly fair question. When a Home Secretary stands at the Dispatch Box and says that there was wrong guidance in the past, one of the lessons that can be learned without needing a review is that we must be much more careful about guidance in the future.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): On my right hon. Friend's wider review of structures and processes, will he ensure that Border Force, a key Home Office agency, fully considers the potential of new and advanced technologies in making sure that our future border security system is both fair and efficient?

Sajid Javid: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Border Force and some of the technology it uses are already way ahead of the situation in many other countries. However, as we develop a new immigration system, Border Force has been looking at what other countries have done that we could learn from. Lessons were learned, for example, from a recent exercise with Australia, and we can look at some things that are being done there.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Anyone choosing to drive on Britain's roads does so with the understanding that from time to time a police officer may stop them and require them to provide a specimen of breath, failing which they could be liable to prosecution. In those circumstances, does my right hon. Friend agree that a system that is optional and scrupulously safeguards the human rights of immigrants is exactly as it should be?

Sajid Javid: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. He has again emphasised that providing DNA should be optional, because it can help those individuals, and if they choose to provide it, we should take that seriously, but it should be just that—optional, not mandatory.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement and welcome the steps that he is taking to put this situation right. Does he agree that it is essential in cases of this nature that the Government act not only quickly, but with openness and transparency?

Sajid Javid: I agree, and that is why I decided to publish and put in the Library for the whole House to see the internal review that has already been done and was commissioned within days. That is why I will be writing to the Home Affairs Committee today as well, and no doubt there will be future opportunities to keep the House updated, whether by me, the Minister for Immigration or another Minister.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's openness and bluntness in his statement. DNA evidence will clearly be useful in cases when people have come from areas of conflict and other forms of records might no longer be available. How will

he look to set out to those who are looking to apply for immigration status in this country how DNA evidence will help them, but is not required to be provided by them?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. Let me refer again to the scheme to help Afghan nationals. Afghanistan is a good example of a clear conflict zone. Many Afghan nationals, such as interpreters, help British forces, and we owe them a duty of respect and have a responsibility to them. I had already made changes a few months ago to welcome more of them to settle in our country, if they wish, and from a safety point of view we must help in such cases. Under that scheme, they should not have been told that this was mandatory. Once the system is explained, people might believe that providing DNA will help them and then choose to do so. In those cases involving Afghan nationals from that conflict zone, given the work they did for this country, we can even look to pay for that, but the key point is that the process should always be optional for them.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I welcome the news that my right hon. Friend has set up an urgent review, but given that DNA evidence has been sought from applicants under successive Governments, does he agree that this issue should not be politicised, as happens all too often?

Sajid Javid: I agree, but a decision on whether an issue is politicised cannot be taken by just one side of the House. This is an important point, and it is worth reminding ourselves that after the wrongs done to the Windrush generation were first discovered, a review of historical cases over the summer showed that almost half those cases in which people suffered detriment took place under the previous Labour Government. Since then, there has been a much more co-operative approach across the House. I think that that is what the public want to see, and it is what they would want to see in this case as well.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): A compassionate immigration system is, above all, an efficient immigration system, so I welcome the review my right hon. Friend is carrying out. Will he, however, commit that in the new immigration system, which will of course apply to far more people once we have left the European Union, he will make the case for using DNA to speed up applications, because that can be very much in the interests of applicants?

Sajid Javid: That is an important point. I think it is already the situation that where someone chooses to provide DNA evidence, it generally speeds up their case, because DNA is pretty straightforward to analyse and to make a determination about compared with cases involving paperwork that sometimes goes back and forth between the applicant and the Home Office. In cases where people choose to do this, the matter should be dealt with as quickly as possible.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement that he will review the immigration system. Can he assure the House that concerns raised in cases from across the

United Kingdom will be taken into account when forming these new structures to ensure that our new policies and system will provide not only clarity, but consistency across the UK?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right. As we review our immigration system and consider any changes, it is crucial that they will apply clearly and uniformly in exactly the same way throughout the United Kingdom.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is 34 years since Dr Alec Jeffreys pioneered the use of DNA fingerprinting at Leicester University, which we in the UK should be incredibly proud of. Can the Minister assure me that that will continue to be an option for settling immigration cases?

Sajid Javid: I can assure my hon. Friend that when someone makes the choice for themselves to provide biometric details or evidence, such as through DNA fingerprinting, we should absolutely take that into account, not least to help them with their case.

BILL PRESENTED

FISHERIES BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Secretary Gove, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Secretary Dominic Raab, Dr Secretary Fox, Secretary David Mundell, Secretary Alun Cairns and Secretary Karen Bradley, presented a Bill to make provision about policy objectives in relation to fisheries, fishing and aquaculture; to make provision about access to British fisheries; to make provision about the licensing of fishing boats; to make provision about the determination and distribution of fishing opportunities; to make provision enabling schemes to be established for charging for unauthorised catches of sea fish; to make provision about grants in connection with fishing, aquaculture or marine conservation; to make provision about the recovery of costs in respect of the exercise of public functions relating to fish or fishing; to confer powers to make further provision in connection with fisheries, aquaculture or aquatic animals; to make provision about byelaws and orders relating to the exploitation of sea fisheries; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 278) with explanatory notes (Bill 278-EN).

Folic Acid Fortification

12.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): I beg to move,

That this House has considered folic acid fortification.

This week is Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Awareness Week, so it seems fitting to be having this debate today. The House will have heard the Minister with responsibility for public health, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), announce during Health questions on Tuesday that the Government are launching a public consultation in early 2019 on the proposal to add folic acid to flour. This issue has attracted wide interest from a large group of stakeholders, and it is important that we properly consult on the proposal, to ensure that all people have an opportunity to register their views. We will be encouraging people to take part in the consultation.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): During his speech, will the Minister tell the House why the Government have apparently ruled out a publicity campaign to encourage those who are at risk to take folic acid supplements and are instead proposing this mass medication?

Nigel Adams: We will be encouraging all stakeholders, as well as the public, to take part in the consultation. I will certainly look into the matter that my right hon. Friend has raised and ensure that someone writes to him.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Given the evidence that neural tube defects such as spina bifida emerge between the 18th and the 28th day after conception and that most women are not taking folic acid supplements in accordance with the Government's guidelines before conception or during their first trimester, does the Minister agree that supplementation alone does not work?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman takes a keen interest in this matter and has done some extraordinary work on it. He makes an important point. This is why awareness is crucial for all women of childbearing age, including those who are not pregnant but might be considering becoming pregnant.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I recall that we did not know our first child was on the way until 22 weeks; we were not particularly planning to have a baby. It is not always easy to foresee these eventualities. Will the Minister take into consideration the fact that not everyone can prepare for eventualities that they are not expecting?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly plausible point from personal experience. Not everyone can see into the future and plan accordingly. A large number of pregnancies are unplanned, so I understand his point.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Nigel Adams: I will. I will get past my second paragraph at some point.

Rebecca Pow: When I was pregnant with my third child, I took folic acid supplements and ate lots of green vegetables, which contain folic acid. However, as colleagues have said, many people do not know that they are pregnant early enough to start doing that. Also, they might not have received the right advice from the medical profession. This consultation is important on those grounds, but will my hon. Friend also ensure that it is very wide ranging so that consideration can be given to all aspects, including the appropriate safeguarding of voluntary fortification by the food industry? Will consideration be given to coeliacs, who use gluten-free flour? This has to be a very comprehensive consultation if it is to be effective.

Nigel Adams: It does; my hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. A number of foods already contain folic acid, and the consultation will have to take that into consideration. It will also look into what a safe upper limit is in that regard. This is why we want to ensure that the consultation is as thorough as possible.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is being extremely generous in giving way; we are not allowing him to make much progress. May I take it from his last assertion about an upper limit that the consultation, which we welcome, is not so much about whether folic acid will be included in flour but about what the upper limit will be?

Nigel Adams: I do not want to prejudge the outcome of the consultation, and I am sure that the hon. Lady would not expect me to do so. It will have to take an upper limit into consideration; indeed, that will be an incredibly important part of the consultation. We want to ensure that the consultation is properly done, that it is thorough and that it can advise Ministers. We will be coming back to the House to report back on it.

I shall move on, if that is okay with colleagues. I think from the tone of the debate thus far that the announcement has been well received. We will be properly consulting on and considering all aspects of this very important issue. I note that many colleagues are well informed about it and that they are aware of the reason behind the calls for mandatory fortification, but it might be helpful to summarise again what we are trying to prevent. Neural tube defects are birth defects of the brain, spine or spinal cord. They happen in the first few weeks of pregnancy, often before a woman even knows that she is pregnant. The two most common neural tube defects are spina bifida and anencephaly. These are devastating conditions, and the Government are fully aware of their effect on the individuals themselves and their families. We have already heard the acute interest and strength of feeling on this issue from Members of this House and in the other place, including on what can be done to ensure that pregnant women have healthy pregnancies and give their unborn babies the best protection during the crucial early weeks of development.

Unless someone is pregnant or thinking of having a baby, they should be able to get all the folate they need by eating a varied and balanced diet. Existing pregnancy advice to women who are trying to conceive or who are

likely to become pregnant is that they should take a daily supplement of 400 micrograms of folic acid until the 12th week of pregnancy. They are also advised to increase their daily intake of folate by eating more folate-rich foods, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) referred. Examples are spinach and broccoli, as well as foods voluntarily fortified with folic acid, including a wide range of breakfast cereals.

We know, however, that around half the pregnancies in the UK are unplanned. In those that are planned, it has been estimated that only half of all mothers took folic acid supplements or modified their diet to increase folate intake. This has led to calls for the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid so that women can get it from dietary sources other than foods that naturally contain it. Successive Governments have not considered that mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid to be the best way to protect public health and have instead promoted the use of folic acid supplements as a part of a wide range of pre-conception and post-conception advice to women of childbearing age. However, we are now taking the opportunity that this consultation presents to seek the public's opinion on this proposed important change.

My colleague the Minister with responsibility for public health responded to a Westminster Hall debate in May 2018 that was secured by the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), who has campaigned tirelessly on this issue. In his response, the Minister confirmed that the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment—I shall refer to it as COT from now on—had agreed to take forward for further consideration the issue of tolerable upper limits for folate. COT published its interim conclusions in July 2018, but it has yet to finalise its detailed review. In summary, COT concluded that the potential masking of pernicious anaemia was still an appropriate and relevant endpoint on which to base a tolerable upper level, but that the level at which this effect started to occur was unclear. It concluded that further analysis of the data was necessary, but that the upper level would not decrease—that is, it would stay at 1 microgram a day or could be increased—as there was no convincing evidence that masking occurred at levels of intake below 1 microgram a day.

COT has discussed this again at this week's meeting, and as soon as the outcome of its consideration becomes available, it will inform Ministers' thinking in respect of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition's recommendations on the mandatory fortification of flour and about folic acid advice generally. We will reflect that outcome in the consultation document, together with whether we need to take any other action, such as discussions with the industry on removing folic acid from products that are currently voluntarily fortified, such as breakfast cereal. We will also be working closely with colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the consultation, its responses and any resulting conclusions.

Rebecca Pow: It goes without saying that it would be worth examining the results of tackling anaemia by fortifying flour with iron and of tackling tooth decay by putting fluoride in toothpaste. Similar things have been influenced by approaches to general health, and we could learn great lessons from such examples.

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is research and evidence in these areas from around the world, and we hope that it will feature in the consultation. We certainly need to learn from the approaches taken elsewhere.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I am grateful to the Minister for what he is saying and warmly welcome the announcement made by the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), on Tuesday. It is a tremendous step forward. As for looking at what has happened across the world, well over 85 countries, including the United States, have mandatory fortification of flour, so there is an awful lot of evidence out there, and clearly it should be taken into account.

Nigel Adams: It certainly will. The right hon. Gentleman takes a keen in this area, and other countries such as the United States, as he mentioned, Canada and Australia have introduced mandatory fortification. We need to learn from all that, but we also need to understand the dietary habits of the United Kingdom. It is worth mentioning that no EU country currently has mandatory folic acid fortification, but he is right and we will certainly be learning from the experiences elsewhere.

I assure the House that Ministers have always taken the issue of pre and post-conception advice seriously, and the public consultation will allow us to fully explore the fortification of flour. This is the start of a detailed dialogue with the industry, the general public, relevant charities—I thank Shine, which has done so much campaigning in this area—and members of the scientific community. This Government will ensure that the decisions we take will come after the full consideration of all views. It is my pleasure to introduce this important debate, and I look forward to hearing the contributions and views of Members.

1.12 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I thank the Government for allowing time for this important and very timely debate. It is a pleasure to be here responding on behalf of the Opposition on World Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Awareness Day, as the Minister pointed out, to speak about folic acid fortification, particularly after the announcement by the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), earlier this week that the Government will be consulting on fortifying flour with folic acid. After decades of campaigning, I know that the announcement has been welcomed by campaigners and their families, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) and the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) for their tireless campaigning on this issue. I too welcome the announcement although I have some further questions, and I would appreciate it if the Minister could elaborate on them later.

As early as 1991, the Medical Research Council published a report recommending that white flour in the UK should be fortified with folic acid, which had been shown in other countries to prevent neural tube defects in fetuses. Similarly, mandatory fortification, with limits on voluntary supplementation, was backed by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition in

2006 and again in 2017. Why, then, has it taken successive Governments so long to get to this point? The latest national diet and nutrition survey statistics state that 91% of women of childbearing age have a red blood cell folate level below the level estimated to lower the risk of NTDs. It is therefore clear that more needs to be done. In fact, the Public Health and Primary Care Minister said during Health and Social Care questions this week that he was

“convinced that the evidence shows overwhelmingly that this is something we should be doing.”—[*Official Report*, 23 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 135.]

I therefore wonder about the purpose of the consultation.

The Minister may have already answered some of my questions, but is the consultation about seeing whether flour should be fortified with folic acid or is it just about establishing what the upper limit for folate levels should be? Modelling undertaken by Food Standards Scotland in 2017 indicated that fortification at the recommended levels, with a capping of voluntary fortification and supplements, can achieve the reductions in NTD risk without increasing the number of people consuming the upper recommended limit. Is this a scenario that the consultation will consider? Up until now, the Government have continued their policy of voluntary folic acid supplementation for women of childbearing age. Does the Minister expect that advice to continue throughout the consultation and evaluation period?

The press release published this week by the Department of Health and Social Care says that the consultation “will launch in early 2019”.

Is the Minister able to tell the House exactly when the consultation will launch and how long it is expected to last? The evidence has been available for decades, and people have been campaigning on this issue for many years, so it seems only right that the consultation should conclude as quickly as possible. With that in mind, does the Minister have any expectations of when we will have the results of the consultation? Finally, as the Minister will know, not everyone eats bread or is able to eat wheat flour, so will the consultation make any assessment of how we reach those who do not eat bread or wheat flour? Will the fortification include only wheat flour, or will it extend to other flours, such as corn, rice and gluten-free flour?

That is a lot of questions for the Minister to answer, especially as it is not his brief—he is doing a fabulous job of stepping into various areas across Government—and I am sure that colleagues across the House will have further questions for him, but as this change has been such a long time coming, we are very keen to get an answer to the key question: when will flour be fortified with folic acid in the UK? I look forward to this debate and to hearing the Minister’s answers at the end.

1.17 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It seems that a lot of us are substituting for other people today, but it is nice to speak in a debate on a topic on which there is a little consensus and agreement for a change, so I welcome the Government making time for this debate and the announcement about the fortification of flour with folic acid. It is particularly appropriate, as the Minister said, to be holding this debate on World Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Awareness Day. As the hon. Member

[Patrick Grady]

for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) said, this change has been a long time coming—the Medical Research Council first called for it in 1991—so I hope that the consultation will be concluded as quickly as possible so that we can move to an implementation phase.

Since 1991, the evidence of the benefits of folic acid fortification has only increased to the point at which there is now clear consensus across the medical community about the importance of this step. Dr Linda de Caestecker, public health director of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, and Dr Jonathan Sher, an independent consultant on pre-conception health, education and care based in Edinburgh, have both written and campaigned extensively on this issue. In February this year, they published a paper in which they said that folic acid, or vitamin B9, could accurately be described as “vitamin benign” given its strong benefits and lack of significant downsides. They also pointed to the important fact that the lack of fortification has led to a health inequality gap, saying in a recent edition of *Holyrood* magazine:

“Relatively well-educated, well-informed, well-off women tend to follow the advice”—

to take supplements before and during pregnancy—

“while their less advantaged sisters often do not. The gap has also grown between women with well-planned and well-timed pregnancies and the large percentage of Scottish women who become pregnant unintentionally, unexpectedly, or with minimal preparation.”

The challenge is particularly acute in Scotland, which has more live births of babies with spina bifida per head of population than anywhere else in the UK. In turn, as the Minister hinted at, the UK rate is higher than that in many other parts of the world where fortification has already been introduced. Over 70 countries have already adopted this practice and have seen a decline in neural tube defects as a result. That is one of the reasons why last year the Scottish Public Health Minister, my good friend—and now the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government—Aileen Campbell, along with her Welsh Assembly counterpart, wrote to ask the then Secretary of State for Health to move forward on fortification.

The Scottish Government have also made it clear that they are prepared to take their own steps on fortification if necessary, but the evidence and research mentioned by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West shows that fortification will be more effective if it is rolled out at the same time across the whole UK. It is welcome that action is at last being taken. The focus of the consultation must therefore be on how fortification can be delivered effectively, not on whether it should be implemented in the first place. I echo some of the hon. Lady's questions.

When the announcement was trailed earlier this month, the chief executive of Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Scotland, Andy Wynd, said that the decision to proceed with fortifying flour with folic acid will have a monumental impact on the health of babies in Scotland. I pay tribute to the work of SBHS and other organisations, such as Shine and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which have long campaigned on this issue and which provided helpful briefings in advance of today's debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) works very closely with SBHS, which is based in his constituency. SBHS does incredible work to raise awareness of spina bifida and to support people and families with the condition to live happy and fulfilling lives. On that note, I wish the best of luck to my friend, and former constituent, Tommy Ga-Ken Wan who, with his dancing partner Piotr Marczak, is taking part in SBHS's “Strictly Come Prancing” event in Glasgow later this month, which will raise much needed funds and awareness—as does the annual SBHS gala Burns supper, which I had the privilege of attending in 2016.

I attended that Burns supper with another constituent, Jackie Lennox, whose sister Tracy was born with spina bifida. Tracy sadly passed away in 2014—as we have heard, spina bifida is a life-limiting condition—and in her memory Jackie established Tracy's tree, which has become a new but much loved tradition in Maryhill. The memorial Christmas tree outside the burgh halls is decorated each year with baubles bearing the names of loved ones who have passed away.

It is difficult to know how Tracy's life, and many others, might have been different if the fortification of flour with folic acid had already been routine, but what we do know is that the introduction of fortification will reduce cases of neural tube defects and complicated pregnancies and will allow more babies and families to live longer and less complicated lives. That is why it is important that the Government now move as quickly as possible to take these last steps towards implementation. We must make sure we take this opportunity to finally make it, and get it, right.

1.22 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this welcome debate on a welcome Government intervention. I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), the Public Health Minister. He is not here today, but he has been excellent in listening to the evidence on this case in recent months, and he moved decisively to announce the consultation on Tuesday. As the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), said, the consultation is welcomed on both sides of the House and, indeed, by the scientific community not just in the UK but across the world.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), my co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on folic acid fortification. He has spoken with great bravery and sincerity about his family's experiences, and he and many others have played a far more important role than I have in bringing home to Members the importance of this change.

I also pay tribute to Shine, and particularly to its current chief executive Kate Steele. The charity does wonderful work to support individuals and families with spina bifida and neural tube defects, and it has played an excellent role in campaigning for fortification.

Lastly, I thank Lord Rooker. He campaigned on this issue long before I and many others did. In truth, he has been the leading advocate in Parliament for this change over a long period. This is a proud day for him.

Obviously there will be some controversial questions. The Government are proposing a big public health intervention, and it is right that they are consulting, but the Public Health Minister was right to say on Tuesday that the evidence is overwhelming and that he is convinced by the evidence.

I will spell out the scale and gravity of these conditions in the UK to bring it home to Members, and to those who might read or watch this debate. We now all know that neural tube defects are the failure of the spine to close at either end, and they happen early in pregnancy. Neural tube defects can lead either to spina bifida or anencephaly.

Anencephaly occurs in 40% of neural tube defects and is fatal. Children with anencephaly do not survive, and often they die very quickly after birth. Spina bifida is where the spinal cord does not properly form, which obviously leads to poor mobility, poor bladder control, bowel issues, often learning disabilities, mental health problems, physical health problems and lifelong disability. It is an extremely grave condition.

Neural tube defects affect around 1,000 pregnancies each year in our country. In this country, two fetuses a day are aborted following the diagnosis of a neural tube defect, and two children a week are born with such birth defects.

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful case, for which I am grateful. Does he agree that one of the most frightening statistics is that young women under the age of 20 are five times less likely to take folic acid supplements? That strengthens the case for mandatory flour fortification.

Owen Smith: From memory, I believe that just 6% of women aged under 20 supplement their diet prior to or, indeed, during pregnancy. It is clear that this particularly affects younger women, perhaps because they have not yet read the literature, gone to classes or otherwise been informed. The other reality is that there is a much lower level of folate among women from working-class and black and ethnic minority backgrounds, which is another fundamental reason for addressing this in the manner proposed.

Shine estimates that the cost of caring for people with spina bifida and other neural tube defects is around £500,000 over their lifetime, but the point is not the financial cost to the NHS or to the taxpayer; the human cost to families and individuals is what counts. In this awareness week for spina bifida and hydrocephaly, Shine has been highlighting some of those human examples.

One example is of a young woman called Nicky, who had spina bifida. She could walk a little, but she used a wheelchair most of the time. She loved animals, and she volunteered at a local animal sanctuary and rode at weekends. At 18, before she intended to start a university degree in animal care, the shunt that controlled her hydrocephalus needed replacing. It went wrong, and she had three dreadful years of ill health during which she was largely housebound or hospitalised. She obviously could not continue with her education, and she died at 21.

That is not an uncommon case; unfortunately, it is all too common. There is no certainty, of course, that had Nicky's mother supplemented her diet prior to conception,

or indeed during pregnancy, Nicky would not have been born with spina bifida. However, we have known for almost 30 years of the clear evidence that there is a dramatically greater likelihood that Nicky would have been born without a neural tube defect had her mother had the requisite levels of folate in her system. As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) said, it was in 1991 that the Medical Research Council first published the evidence showing a 72% reduction in the likelihood of conceiving a child with a neural tube defect if the mother supplements her diet with folic acid.

The history is interesting, because successive Governments have not responded to the evidence with fortification, on which this Government are now consulting. I make it clear that I think the last Labour Government should have done so. We did a huge amount through bold public health interventions. Smoking cessation is the best example, but there are myriad examples. The last Labour Government were very good at addressing public health needs. However, this is one area where they did not undertake to act and they should have done. The position our Government and successive Governments took was to move towards advice that diets should be supplemented with 400 micrograms of folic acid during and prior to pregnancy. As many people have said, the problem is that 40% of pregnancies are unplanned; only 30% of women take the right dose of folic acid even if they are supplementing; young women tend not to supplement at all, as my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) said; and working-class women and women from black and ethnic minority backgrounds have lower levels of folate because they do not supplement very often. Across the whole population, irrespective of demography, about 75% of women do not have the right levels of folate and therefore are at increased risk of giving birth to a child with a neural tube defect.

Other countries have been bolder than us. As the right hon. Member for Belfast North said, about 85 countries have chosen to introduce mandatory fortification, including America, Canada, South Africa and lots of countries in South America. It has not happened in Europe, but this will be another example of Britain leading the way in Europe.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): My hon. Friend has shown great leadership on this issue, and Shine has been a fantastic help to campaigners across the country on this issue. Does he agree that families in south Wales are glad the Government are moving on this but that they want this consultation to be completed much more quickly—as quickly as possible—because they think this important public health initiative should be brought in sooner rather than later?

Owen Smith: That is right. I understand why the Government need to consult. There has been a debate about the upper level of folate. As I may discuss briefly later, the evidence suggests that there is not necessarily any issue associated with an upper tolerable limit. A recent paper in January last year by Professor Sir Nicholas Wald, who did the original research in the early 1990s, very effectively debunked the notion that there is an upper tolerable level of folate. Other studies have done the same, but I am confident that that will come out in

[Owen Smith]

the consultation. The point my hon. Friend makes about families in his south Wales constituency and mine is well made. To illustrate that, using the 72% statistic, let me say that had the Labour Government introduced this measure in 1998, at the same time as the United States did, 3,000 babies would have been saved from being born with spina bifida or anencephaly.

There is no evidence from countries across the world that have undertaken this measure of ill effects in the population. There is lots of evidence to show that there are other ancillary benefits; one study in Norway has shown a diminution in the volume of autism in the population. There is huge scientific support for this measure, including from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists; the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health; the Royal College of Midwives; the British Maternal and Fetal Medicine Society; the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare; the British Dietetic Association; the Governments of Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland; the chief medical officers in Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland; Public Health England; Public Health Wales; the Food Standards Agency; and Professor Sir Colin Blakemore. The list goes on and on. Crucially, the Government's own Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition has advocated this measure for the best part of 20 years. So it is a measure whose time has come. It will be enormously beneficial for our population, and if we in this House undertake to do it, we will contribute to saving hundreds of lives each year and thousands of lives over the years to come. I commend the Government for having the bravery and foresight to do it.

1.34 pm

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) in this debate because, as has been mentioned, he co-chairs the all-party group and has done a fantastic job in raising awareness of the issue in a relatively short time. It is not that long since the all-party group was set up, so this must be something of a record in getting the Government to move. I thank the Minister for what he has said and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who is the Minister responsible for public health, for what he said on Tuesday and for the speed with which he has moved on the issue. Many, many people have been involved in highlighting it over the years, and I join the tributes that have already been paid to people such as Lord Jeff Rooker, to the scientists who have been involved, to the charities in Scotland and to Shine, which operates in Northern Ireland and across the rest of the UK. They have done tremendous work in campaigning on the issue over many years, in addition to the work they are doing to help families who have someone with spina bifida or hydrocephalus in the family and who have lost someone who had these conditions.

This is a great debate and this measure is a great positive move. Clearly, we would wish that it had happened earlier, but we are delighted it has reached this stage now. I thank the Government for taking it forward now, because it is important that we move ahead and do not lose time, as too much time has been wasted. The approach adopted over many years by the Government

has been of not wanting to go down the road of what is described by some people as “mass medication”. All sorts of genuine issues have been raised about the effects, but the science proves clearly and objectively that this is safe and will prevent thousands of people from being born with severe conditions—and that does not take into account the many tens of thousands of terminations that happen as a result of parents learning that their unborn baby may be affected severely by spina bifida or hydrocephalus.

The approach of Governments previously—to offer advice, education and information on supplementing diet with folic acid—has not worked. That is clear. Over the past 20 to 30 years, it has not made a difference, mainly because of some of the issues we have discussed: the fact that almost half of pregnancies are unplanned; a lot of people in certain demographics and age groups are simply less likely to know about this or come across the information that is out there; and these neural tube defects develop 14 to 28 days into pregnancy—once that has happened, it is too late to start taking folic acid supplements. I have no argument with the advice on taking folic acid in the early stages of pregnancy, but in the vast majority of cases it will be too late—these supplements need to be taken in advance of conception if they are going to make a difference; that is the reality of it. If we continue with the current policy, the problem is simply going to continue.

There is an alternative, it is safe and it has been proved to have worked in more than 85 countries, including Australia and the United States. The scientific consensus is enormous, and the hon. Member for Pontypridd read out the list of scientific bodies, clinicians and others who are all agreed about the need to proceed along this path. Therefore, I, too, join the call that this should not be a long, drawn out consultation, as ample evidence is already available on the issue. The consultation should be proceeded with as quickly as possible to ensure that this is introduced, and I make the plea that it should be introduced across the UK. We had a debate yesterday about Northern Ireland, and I do not want to get into all of that, but on this issue the Government have taken steps to introduce sensible, non-controversial measures where appropriate.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) mentioned the high incidence in Scotland and we have a high incidence in Northern Ireland. He is absolutely right to make that point and I congratulate the Scottish Government on what they have done on the issue, but we cannot allow some kind of interregnum in Northern Ireland. This issue is important and I think that there would be absolute consensus across the board in Northern Ireland that any change should happen there alongside the rest of the United Kingdom.

The effects of these conditions on the children who are born with them are extreme. I have spoken previously about my own son, Andrew, who was born in 1990 with spina bifida and hydrocephalus, and about the severe impact that had on his life. As he grew older, there were more severe effects. Of course, that did not just affect him. He was a bright, cheerful boy and a lovely child. The lives of those who came into contact with him were enriched, and our lives were certainly enriched by having him. It had severe effects on him—he was hospitalised many times and had shunt operations and setbacks—and there was also an effect on the wider family. It affected

the entire family circle. We had great family back-up and support, but in many cases people do not have that. This is a really massive issue, and that is where charities such as Shine and others come into play, providing such fantastic support, help and assistance.

If it can be prevented, why are we not taking the steps that need to be taken? Andrew had eight years of a wonderful life, in the sense that he was loved and gave out so much love, but the problems that he had and faced throughout that short life were very, very difficult for him and for the rest of his family. We would love to see children being born without having to have these conditions. They do not need to. We now have to move on with this issue. There is no good reason not to. Some abstract arguments may be advanced and some theoretical arguments made about liberty, mass medication and other things, but they have been clearly disproved—they are a total red herring. Folic acid fortification is something that can be done that is safe and that works. It will not prevent these conditions entirely—some children will still be born with them—but there will be a lot fewer, so we need to move forward.

I welcome what the Government have done. They have listened and responded. Let us now get on with it. I pay tribute to everyone who has been involved in the campaign and got it to this stage. The political agenda is dominated by certain subjects but, if nothing else happens, if we can get this done, it will be a great legacy for this Government and this Parliament.

1.43 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) for initially asking the Backbench Business Committee for this debate. When time could not be allocated, the Government allowed for this time instead, so I thank them, too. I thank my hon. Friend and the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) for their tireless campaigning. I was moved to speak in the debate because of my hon. Friend's presentation at the Backbench Business Committee, of which I am a member. This whole issue seems like such a no-brainer, so I am really pleased that the Government have come forward with a consultation. I echo the comments of Members who want the consultation to happen quickly so that we can get measures in place.

In preparation for this debate, I went to Holland & Barrett to find out the cost of folic acid tablets. Just one jar costs £8.49. Being pregnant is an expensive business, as is having children. As well as folic acid pills—if someone is aware of their pregnancy or intends to become pregnant—there are baby clothes, decorations, cots and car seats to buy, and all that at a time when many people have very little money and are just about managing. Do we really expect those families to spend £8.49 on supplements?

Although supplements are costly, treating illnesses caused by the lack of folic acid in the diet of expectant mothers costs the NHS far more. Studies show that adding folic acid to food reduces instances of neural tube defects by 72%. That is exceedingly significant when we consider the fact that hundreds of babies are affected by spina bifida every year in the UK. Researchers in Chile compared the annual cost of the rehabilitation and treatment of children with spina bifida with the

cost of adding folic acid to flour. The results showed that for every \$1 invested in adding folic acid to flour, \$12 was saved in medical treatment and care. Adding folic acid to our flour will not only benefit the would-be victims of neural tube defects, but save significant amounts for the NHS and therefore the taxpayer. It is estimated that it would cost only £200,000 a year for us to add folic acid to flour, and there are only 10 major flour mills in the country. It could be done very easily and very quickly.

Of course, there is a small minority of people who do not like mass measures such as the fortification of foods, but food fortification is nothing new and already makes an important contribution to diets in the UK and overseas. In the UK we already fortify white and brown flour with iron, thiamin and niacin after they are removed with the bran during the milling of wheat, so the relevant technology and infrastructure is already in the UK industry. We add other substances to food for flavour, for texture or to increase the speed of production, so why would we not add a harmless ingredient, for which there is no upper limit, that could save hundreds of babies a year from being born in the UK with lifelong birth defects?

Having children is an incredibly exciting time for parents—full of hope and expectation—but it is also fraught with risk and concern. Pregnant women and expectant parents are bombarded with information about diseases and issues that can afflict the mother and the baby. If we can do one simple, cheap and effective thing to reduce the chances of a baby contracting a life-changing illness, surely it is a no-brainer.

1.47 pm

Mrs Hodgson: With the leave of the House, I wish to say what an excellent debate this has been. I thank the Members who have taken part: the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) in particular for his very moving speech, and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). We really have heard excellent and moving speeches. Most Members present were in Westminster Hall for the debate in May when together we called on the Government to look again at this issue. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), did listen. He assured us all when we were lobbying him on the way out that he had listened. He told us to watch this space, so it is really good that within six months we are back, that we are all in agreement that there are benefits to fortifying flour with folic acid, and that we are keen to have that happen as soon as possible.

As we have heard, charities such as Shine, from which I have received very detailed and helpful briefings, have been campaigning on this issue for decades, and I pay tribute to Lord Rooker, who has also shown great leadership on this matter over decades. Will the Minister say whether charities and campaigners will have an opportunity to be involved with and to engage in the consultation? How will they be able to do that? Many of them have not only first-hand experience of why fortification is needed, but the expertise that should be utilised during the consultation. My last question, I promise, is:

[Mrs Hodgson]

will the Minister please tell the House, if the information is available, which Department is facilitating the consultation and who it will be led by?

After this issue has been on the table for two and a half decades, we all agree that it is now time for our flour to be fortified with folic acid. I look forward to hearing the Minister outline the timeframe in his closing speech.

1.49 pm

Nigel Adams: With the leave of the House, I echo the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) in saying that we have had a fantastically well-informed debate. It is good to see the House coming together. I am sure that everyone will agree that the tone of the debate has been extremely welcome. We have heard Members' views about the proposal to fortify flour with folic acid, and I thank all of them for their contributions and interventions. This will ensure that the consultation document reflects both the scientific evidence base and the very personal impacts of the consequences for families dealing with an NTD birth. What has been clear from the debate is that we must move forward on this issue as soon as possible.

On modelling, the Government will consider all current dietary habits of women of childbearing age to help to inform the impact of this proposed mandatory fortification of flour to ensure that we are reaching the desired outcome. All dietary patterns will be considered whether they be cultural, religious or just personal preference.

On safety, we will continue to listen to COT's advice to ensure that a safe upper limit is not exceeded by proposed changes to the folate intake from fortified flour. I hear what the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) says, but we have a duty to listen to COT's advice. On pre and post-conception advice, we will ensure that a clear public health message is provided so that young women can properly understand what this proposed fortification change means for them having a healthy pregnancy.

Let me refer to some of the contributions to the debate. I thank the hon. Members for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) and for Redcar (Anna Turley) for their interventions, and also the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who spoke in such an informed way. I really need to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Pontypridd for his work as co-chair of the all-party group on folic fortification and for highlighting those individual cases that he referenced. In particular, there was that incredibly moving story of the young girl, Nicky, which must have touched everyone here. As a Department, we are incredibly grateful for all the work that he has done. He, like the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West, was right to reference the work of Lord Rooker. We are extremely grateful for what he has done in this area and for his campaign on folic fortification.

The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) speaks eloquently and brilliantly on all issues in this House. It has been a great privilege to listen to his contributions over the past eight years, but particularly in this debate. To come to this Chamber and to speak on a personal level about his experiences must have been incredibly challenging, and the way in which he

talked about his son, Andrew, was incredibly moving. Both he and the hon. Member for Pontypridd, as co-chairs of the all-party group, should be very proud of their work to get the Government to this stage. I am absolutely sure that Andrew would be incredibly proud of his father's work.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) rightly highlighted the costs—the relatively small costs—involved in this area. That is a great reminder to the Government that this is an issue that is not particularly expensive to deal with. There are not that many flour mills around the country, as he said. I am very grateful to him for his contribution.

I turn now to the comments of my friend, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West, whom I have had the great privilege of working with on various campaigns over the years in this place. She asked exactly when the consultation would be launched and how long it would last. I know that other Members will want to know that as well. We do not have an exact date, but it will be early in the new year. I can assure her that it will happen as soon as we have been able to finalise the impact assessments. There is no fixed time for such an important consultation, but we expect it to last around 12 weeks to ensure that everybody has had a chance to consider the matter and respond. She asked whether there was an expectation of when we would have the results. Well, we will consider the outcome of the consultation as soon as it closes. Again, I cannot give her an exact date today in the House, but I can assure Members that we are committed to no delay and to responding as quickly as possible on this very important matter.

The hon. Lady also asked whether the consultation would consider the fortification of flour, or whether it would just establish an upper limit. I can assure her that the consultation will consider whether the calls to fortify wheat flour will achieve the objective for pregnant women. COT is considering the safe upper levels as part of that and its conclusions will be reflected within the wider consultation. She asked which Department will be responsible for leading the consultation, and I can tell her that it will be the Department of Health and Social Care. She also asked about gluten-free flour and whether fortification will include just wheat flour, or other types of flour such as cornflour for those with coeliac disease. We will consider all food in the modelling to ensure that the policy reaches its objective. We will also discuss with industry the issue of foods that are currently voluntarily fortified, such as breakfast cereal.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked how charities such as Shine can support the Government in ensuring that the announced consultation progresses quickly. We are very grateful to Shine and other charities for their tireless promotion of this important issue. Until we know the outcome of the consultation, it is too soon to consider which legislative vehicle might be needed to give effect to any decision, but the consultation process will allow us to make a decision once we have that outcome.

We very much hope that the consultation will raise public awareness of the need to continue to take the recommended folic acid supplement before conception and up to the 12th week of pregnancy. That is vital, as we have heard, and I really hope that this message can be brought to the attention of women both now and in respect of any future change. I am confident that this public consultation will give a proper channel to allow

everyone to make their feelings on this issue known. I am sure that everyone who has participated in the debate will very much look forward to its outcome.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered folic acid fortification.

Inclusive Transport Strategy

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Women and Equalities Committee on 10 October, on Disability and the built environment, HC 1471.]

1.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the inclusive transport strategy.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce this important debate today on an issue that will affect us all at some point in our lives. As I am sure right hon. and hon. Members will know, about one in five people in the UK are disabled. We also have an ageing society, and, as people get older, they are more likely to experience a wide range of conditions such as mobility impairments, memory loss, or visual or hearing impairments. As a society, we are also increasingly recognising that not all disabilities are visible and that mental health conditions and cognitive impairments, as well as hearing loss and memory loss, can have just as profound an impact on people as physical disabilities.

Regardless of the nature of a person's disability, they should have the same access to transport and opportunity to travel as everyone else—access to services that most of us take for granted day in, day out. Accessible transport helps to reduce social isolation and loneliness, as well as to create opportunities for disabled people to play a more active role in society. Disabled people are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as non-disabled people, and the Government have a manifesto commitment to get 1 million more disabled people into work by 2027. Disabled people might face many barriers to finding employment, but the ability simply to travel should not be one. Against this backdrop, I am proud to have been the Minister responsible for publishing the Government's inclusive transport strategy in July. I thank the Department for Transport's accessibility team for all their hard work; the sector, which we have worked with; and the disability groups, including the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, that helped and advised us.

The inclusive transport strategy followed an earlier consultation on a draft accessibility action plan that received over 1,000 responses. I thank the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard)—I hope that I pronounced his constituency correctly—for the substantial work that he undertook while he was responsible for the accessibility action plan in the Department for Transport. The accessibility action plan was an extensive engagement programme and represented a number of disability groups, whose voices were taken on board.

Let me remind the House briefly of the main elements of the inclusive transport strategy. First, the word “inclusive” is important, as it signals that we are adopting a holistic approach, rather than simply focusing on the physical accessibility of our infrastructure. This is about much more than simply ensuring that stations have step-free access. It is about designing and implementing all our policies and operations in such a way that they genuinely work for everyone. That is what we mean by inclusive.

The strategy starts off by setting a vision, which is that the Government want disabled people to have the same access to transport as everyone else and to be able

[*Ms Nusrat Ghani*]

to travel confidently, easily and without extra cost. Its overall goal is to create a transport system that offers equal access for disabled people by 2030. We chose that date because it links to the UN sustainable development goals for that year, particularly the goal to provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all. We also took account of the fact that, with the best will in the world, although there is much that we can do quickly—and we will work at a pace—some of the ambitious changes that we want to make will just take time. Some of our infrastructure, for example, was built at a time when accessibility was not taken as seriously as it is today; in fact, it was not considered at all. I am thinking particularly of many of our smaller railway stations, including those in my own constituency, which do not have step-free access. Matters requiring new legislation will also inevitably take time.

Having set the vision and overall goal, the strategy then sets out a larger number of measures under five main themes, which I will briefly summarise. First, it says that we will do more to promote passenger rights and ensure that existing legislation is better enforced. That matters because one very strong message that emerged from the consultation was that, although lots of legislation is already in force, not everyone is always aware of it and it certainly is not always enforced. For example, I am sure that hon. Members have heard many stories of blind people being charged extra for taking guide dogs in taxis or of taxi drivers not stopping to pick them up at all. That sort of behaviour is unacceptable. It is also illegal, but that is not widely enough understood and it is not consistently enforced. That is why we will be launching a public awareness campaign next year, working with a wide range of disability partners to raise awareness of disabled passengers' rights when using the transport system.

The second theme of this strategy is the need for better staff training. We are talking about not just frontline staff such as bus drivers, railway station staff and so on, but also back office staff and managers. Training has to be top down as well as bottom up. This is important because the attitudes of staff can make a huge difference to the journey experiences of disabled people. This can be what makes or breaks a journey and builds or damages the confidence of a disabled passenger.

I am committed to improving staff awareness across the transport sector. Next year, we will publish guidance to improve bus driver awareness training on disability issues. We will also develop a monitoring and enforcement framework for this training, which will include identifying a body to ensure compliance across the bus sector. In the rail sector, bidders in future franchise competitions will be required to commit to providing enhanced disability training for staff, covering a range of impairments, including less visible disabilities. We will also require bidders to commit to involving disabled people in the design and delivery of that training. Involving disabled people directly in the provision of training is essential. It will help to ensure that transport staff fully understand the diversity of disability and the importance of providing good customer service, also enabling them to take some responsibility for the passenger not just on their part of the railway or the station, but for the onward journey.

The strategy's third theme is a need for better information. Having the right information in an accessible format is an essential part of making it easier for people to travel. Of course, this benefits not just disabled people, but everyone else. By accessible information, I mean everything from providing audiovisual information on buses to including clear and simple signage in places such as railway stations that works for people with difficulties with communication, understanding or memory. Audiovisual information on buses is another tool that can make all the difference to someone's experience of a journey. The Department is taking forward the necessary legislation to ensure that this is rolled out across all bus services. We are providing £2 million of funding to help speed this up and make it more affordable, particularly for small companies.

Accessible information is not only about audiovisual information. Improvements to real-time information can also make a difference to someone's confidence to travel. Real-time information can alert people to changes on their journey or enable them to update their assistance requirements. That is why, as part of the strategy, we are supporting the Rail Delivery Group as it trials a new Passenger Assist application. This application will, for the first time, enable disabled passengers to book and change their assistance requirements digitally and receive updates on their journey in real time. I am challenging the Rail Delivery Group to present a mobile system—preferably an app—that will reduce the amount of time it takes to pre-book a journey, making it as easy as possible for disabled people.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Anything that improves the quality of disabled people's experience of passenger assistance is very valuable, but should not the goal be to turn up and go—for someone with a disability to be able to use public transport in just the same way as you or I, without having to make a pre-planned journey? They should simply be able to use the facilities because they are accessible to everyone.

Ms Ghani: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady, who is an expert in this area, as she chairs the Select Committee on Transport. The goal is that every passenger, regardless of their disability, can turn up and go—just as abled-bodied people can—but we have to accept that, in some circumstances, some bookings might need to happen in advance, especially when the journeys involve a variety of transport such as buses, taxis and other sorts of mobility. We hope that Passenger Assist can enable those journeys to be dealt with from start to finish, but of course the aim is for people to be able to turn up and go. More readily available information will benefit us all, including those with disabilities and those requiring physical assistance. We also want to ensure that we are covering other less visible disabilities such as autism and hearing loss.

The fourth theme in the strategy is about ensuring that our infrastructure is genuinely accessible to all. By infrastructure, I mean not only the public realm—stations, bus stations or streets—but also our trains, buses, taxis, boats and planes. The strategy included some significant new commitments under this theme. First, it confirmed that the Government would provide up to £300 million of funding over the period to 2024 to improve the accessibility of our rail network under the Access for

All programme. This is an area of considerable interest for many hon. Members, and it was the subject of a Westminster Hall debate earlier this month. I have also written to all hon. Members to explain how the funding works and what needs to be done if they would like a station to be included in the programme.

Secondly, the strategy included the announcement that the Government would ask local authorities to pause any shared-space schemes that they are considering. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for the work that she and the Women and Equalities Committee, which she chairs, have done to review disability and the built environment, particularly for its recommendation with regard to shared-space schemes. The Committee's recommendations and the feedback provided by many stakeholder groups informed our decision.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Minister has touched on the really important issue of shared spaces. I am pleased to see that the strategy calls for a halt to any further new shared-space developments, but there is a problem with existing shared spaces. Can she confirm whether there will be funding for local authorities to make those shared spaces accessible and not no-go areas for blind and partially sighted people?

Ms Ghani: This is a very important issue on which I gave evidence to the Committee just a few weeks ago. People's interpretations of shared spaces are varied. There is no agreement, even within the community that lobbies for people with visual health problems, on what the minimum size of a pavement should be. That is why we will undertake a consultation with Transport Scotland to get some data on what works and what definitely does not work so that we can update our guidance by the end of next year.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): We, too, have a problem with shared spaces, particularly outside a local primary school. Will the Minister ensure that the needs not only of people with disabilities but of smaller and older people in our communities are included in the consultation so that all voices can be heard? Many of us are very worried about these shared-space ideas.

Ms Ghani: That is an incredibly valuable point. When talking about shared spaces, we may think about those who are using wheelchairs or those with visual health problems, but not about mums or parents with buggies, let alone older people. That is why the interpretation of shared spaces is so varied. There is some valid concern that when shared spaces are imposed in their totality, when there is absolutely no infrastructure in place, the situation can become incredibly complicated. We all have anecdotal evidence of where it is or is not working, but we absolutely need to collect the data so that we can ensure that the guidance is the best that it can be.

As I mentioned, we will work with Transport Scotland to take on board all the feedback. We are working with our stakeholder groups to make sure that we have a much more informed decision on shared spaces, particularly with regard to controlled crossings and kerbs, and dealing with people with a variety of disabilities. It is only right that towns should be designed in a way that works for all, and the Government are determined to work with local authorities to ensure that this happens.

I have written a letter jointly with my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing to clarify the approach that should be taken to shared-space schemes. The letter makes it clear that the pause applies to schemes with relatively large amounts of pedestrian and vehicular movement such as high streets and town centres, but does not apply to streets within new residential areas or the redesign of existing residential streets with very low levels of traffic. Whether to improve individual schemes is a matter for local authorities, which need to ensure that they are compliant with their duties under the Equality Act 2010, but we hope that common sense will prevail before the updated guidance is issued.

The strategy includes a commitment that the Department will provide £2 million of funding to enable more Changing Places toilet facilities to be installed at our motorway service areas. Having access to these facilities can be genuinely life-changing for some families and allow them to make journeys that would otherwise have been impossible. We will shortly announce further details on how we intend to allocate this funding, and we will be working in partnership with Muscular Dystrophy UK. This should allow the majority of motorway service stations across the country to have Changing Places toilets by the early 2020s, compared with fewer than a fifth today.

The Department announced shortly after the publication of the strategy that it would extend the eligibility criteria for the blue badge scheme. The new criteria will extend eligibility to people who cannot undertake a journey without a risk of serious harm to their health or safety, or that of any other person such as young children with autism who cannot undertake a journey without it causing them very considerable psychological distress, or who have very considerable difficulty when walking. This is another step forward in ensuring that people with less visible disabilities get the support that they need to live independently. It was widely welcomed, including by the National Autistic Society, which said that it was

"thrilled that the Department had listened to the concerns of autistic people and their families"

and that the announcement would

"make a massive difference to the lives of many of the 600,000 autistic people in England, and their families."

The fifth and final theme in the strategy is the importance of making sure that our future transport systems work for everyone. Transport is changing, and the technologies and services we are using are also changing rapidly. Many of these changes will offer wonderful opportunities for disabled and older people. Autonomous vehicles, for example, could mean that those who would not otherwise be able to drive, including perhaps those with visual impairment, could do so for the first time.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In Birmingham, people are very excited about the 2022 Commonwealth games, and the Government recently announced £170 million to improve transport there. Does the Minister anticipate that that will ensure that the games are completely accessible to people of all abilities?

Ms Ghani: That is a very valid point. I assume that when my hon. Friend mentions the games being accessible to people of all abilities, he does not mean the contenders but the people who are going along to visit the great city

[Ms Ghani]

of Birmingham. That should be the ambition—absolutely. Our desire is to make sure that our services are fully accessible, and any new funding recognises that as well. New technologies should be designed, from the outset, in such a way that disabled and older people can use them.

The strategy includes a commitment that the Government will publish a monitoring and evaluation framework explaining how we will measure the impact that it is having. That is really important. It is essential that we track the progress that is being made towards our goal of creating a transport system that offers equal access for disabled people. The Department will publish the detailed monitoring and evaluation framework in early 2019.

The strategy also includes a commitment that the Department will report regularly to Parliament on the delivery of commitments set out in it. This will allow hon. Members to hold us properly to account. Finally, it includes a commitment to create a new stakeholder advisory group to allow organisations representing disabled people to have more of an opportunity to shape the Department's policies in the future. The announcements we have made in the strategy show that we have been listening to disabled people, and I am determined to ensure that we continue to do so as we deliver it.

The inclusive transport strategy marks a significant step forward in ensuring that our transport systems are genuinely accessible to all our users. This is a key part of making a society that works for us all. The strategy is ambitious, as it should be, and comprehensive, as it should be, and it sets out a clear direction of travel. The House will have an important role to play in holding the Government to account on the delivery of the strategy. I commend the inclusive transport strategy to the House and look forward to working with hon. Members as the Government deliver it.

2.17 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This debate is about the 13.9 million people in the UK who want to benefit from barrier-free travel, whether for work or leisure, whether to advance their opportunities or lifestyle, and to do so with choice and dignity, and without additional cost. No one chooses to be born with or to develop an impairment, and yet we know that disabled people are seriously economically and socially disadvantaged, frequently facing barriers throughout their lives, and facing discrimination even now in 2018—23 years after the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Inclusivity across our transport system can, should and must break this cycle and enable disabled passengers to access the things that the rest of us can enjoy. Labour fully comprehends this, because it is written in our DNA that when you create barriers, whether economically, socially or physically, you not only discriminate but limit the opportunities of others. We know how transport provides social connectivity to people who are isolated, can facilitate access to work or leisure, and can enhance independence and opportunity. To get this wrong is to limit the lives and hope of others. To get this wrong means that the state has disabled people by allowing barriers to continue.

Progress and spend over the past eight years has been too slow and too little. The inefficiencies within the system have yet again meant that disabled people were pushed to the back of the queue—and, I have to say, without enough realisation from Government or remorse from the industry.

Tragically, Governments and society have for too long built those barriers to disabled people, to exclude them and to remove the freedoms that so many of us take for granted. Today, I am sure we will hear many powerful examples of physical barriers across different modes of transport—planes, trains, buses and taxis—and for those wanting the opportunity to actively travel by cycling, walking or use of a mobility vehicle. We will hear about the infrastructure limitations and barriers that people face, and the choices and opportunities that they limit or deny people altogether.

I recall a woman in my constituency who is doubly incontinent, due to radiotherapy treatment for the disease she had—she did not choose to be so. She was denied universal credit owing to the complete failure of work capability assessments, which has left her in poverty, making it unaffordable for her to travel. Not having a toilet on a train, at a station or on a coach means that she cannot travel to see her mother. That is her goal. We must and should enable her to reach it.

I use that example to highlight the range of considerations that must be taken into account when we create an inclusive transport network. Disabled people are priced off our railways because they are far more economically disadvantaged than non-disabled people. Disabled people have to find an additional £570 a month in costs. Poverty is a major reason why people cannot travel, and because people cannot travel—for example, for work—they are economically disadvantaged. If Labour is about anything, it is about breaking this cycle, which we know has got far worse since this Government came to power. Wages have stagnated to below 2010 levels, and the most in need are denied the very social security to support their access requirements, keeping people in poverty or pushing them further into poverty.

Labour will, as is our mission, end this shameful and disgraceful approach to disabled people. In the sixth richest country in the world, we will not tolerate marginalising the most vulnerable people in our society and robbing them of the most basic rights that anyone should be able to have. Transport provides such an opportunity to turn people's fortunes around. Whether someone faces a physical or sensory impairment, a mental health or neurodiversity challenge or a combination of those, whether they are injured, a parent with young children and buggies to navigate, old or frail, Labour will remove the barriers that stop them achieving their goals.

The Government's inclusive transport strategy makes a good start, but much is missing, and I wait to hear how it will be fully funded and scheduled for implementation. Maybe Monday will be its judge, when the Chancellor gives his Budget statement. I know that the Minister has prioritised this strategy, but sadly her boss, the Secretary of State for Transport, has not shown such commitment.

More than £50 million of the Access for All funding planned for the current control period has been deferred, with half of all projects being postponed. Control period 5 funding has been slashed from £135 million,

including a £32 million roll-over, to £87.1 million in 2012-13 prices, with the remainder of the original fund value now planned to be spent between 2020 and 2024. Labour is committed to restoring the £50 million that the Government have slashed from that budget.

Network Rail is inviting nominations for eligible stations, following the Government's commitment of up to £300 million for Access for All in control period 6, but it is also looking for cash-strapped local authorities to contribute to bids and work in partnership—money that they do not have. Commitment is demonstrated by money. That is where the Government have been left wanting.

The Government's inclusive transport strategy sets out five strands of work: raising awareness of passengers' rights, staff training, improving information, improving infrastructure and using technology. Those are all welcome and all plausible, and long overdue. Addressing rights and responsibilities is good. Every penny wisely spent on infrastructure forms a crucial part of removing barriers for people who want equality, but sadly the strategy is not complete, and I therefore have to say that disappointment was felt on the Labour Benches. I know from talking to the amazing charities working on access issues across the transport sector that they share that disappointment.

I turn now to those who work across the network—something omitted from the Government's strategy. Staff training, which we know can make a real difference, is rightly in the strategy, but who is working in the sector? If the transport sector does not make a radical change to who it employs, transport will fail to understand what is wrong. Of the 13.9 million disabled people, just 3.4 million, or 24%, work—what a wasted opportunity.

Every time I ask this question, I think of a constituent of mine who is autistic. He absolutely loves trains and wants to work on the railway. He has done courses and training under Government schemes, but at 30 he has only had three months of work sticking labels on jam pots. We are impoverished because his ambition has been denied. I set a challenge to the transport sector and the Minister today. Having tried to draw out statistics to no avail on how many disabled people work across the sector, which speaks volumes, my challenge is this: what are you doing to radically change the diversity of the workforce? No excuses and no prejudices—what are you doing?

If the workforce is inclusive, the industry and Government will not only grasp what they have to do to change, but economically, people who have been disabled will be able to get out of their homes and travel, and economically, the sector will benefit. If we have to enable staff, we have to enable everyone. Labour is committed to taking us on that journey, and we believe that the unions will be the facilitators of change. This is in Labour's DNA. It is in our name. We are about transforming the world of work.

At this point, I want to recognise the incredible work that the Transport Salaried Staffs Association has done on neurodiversity and the transport sector. It stands out in the industry and has shown real leadership in recognising opportunity. I also have to extol the commitment and endurance of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers for its persistence in making the case that a second safety-critical person—a guard—must be on a train. It is right. If transport is to be inclusive,

physical and structural changes have to occur, but we also need people to be there, providing the vital public service that enables, not disables, people.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is dealing with issues around the presence of staff. Does she agree that the presence of a member of staff on trains and at the station is not just important for disabled people—it may be vital for them—but is good for everyone, because it means that everyone who encounters a difficulty has someone they can go to for help and advice?

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We know how vital our public servants working across the rail industry and the transport network are, at vital interchanges and stations, providing not only signage and support for individuals but the holistic customer service that the public rightly expect.

Cracked pavements are a major transportation barrier for people who trip over the cracks. People have lost their lives as a result of this. If we are going to talk about active travel, which we must, we have to ensure that councils such as my own—which has shamefully not addressed this—are equipped to address this issue. Parking on pavements is a cause of this and must be addressed. I was delighted when the Minister said that she was committed to addressing this, to help visually and physically disabled people avoid serious risk.

We need to build a cycle industry for everyone. EMPowered Cycles, which I went out with a few weeks ago on a ride, is inspirational in the way that it adapts bikes to enable anyone who wants to cycle to do so. Labour wants every child to have the chance to ride and to access cycling—and, for that matter, we will extend that enjoyment to all, taking away the multiple barriers faced by disabled people who want to cycle. Making cycling accessible for them will make it accessible for all.

The Bus Services Act 2017 rightly demanded that audio-visual equipment be installed across the network—thanks to Labour's amendment. However, two years on, we are still waiting for the Government to lay the regulations. When will those regulations be laid? Will Brexit get in the way yet again, or will we see them laid? The bus companies say that they are not able to install the equipment because they do not know the scope of the requirements on them. I urge the Government to move on that issue.

To access a bus, however, people need a bus. The cuts to bus routes, with 199 routes cut or reduced last year alone, have cut the opportunities for disabled people at a time when 60% of disabled people live in homes without a car. That is why Labour is committed to reconnect people and communities in rural and urban areas through our bus plan. As for the fear this Government have sowed throughout the community transport sector—I thank all those involved in the sector for their service—they have not even had the decency to respond to the consultation from May, which is six months ago, leaving community transport in paralysis. Labour would take away that fear and support this vital lifeline to so many.

In the light of the independent report on taxi and private hire that was published in September, "Taxi and private hire vehicle licensing: recommendations for a safer and more robust system", Labour welcomes the

[*Rachael Maskell*]

recommendations and has committed to reform the legislation guaranteeing national standards on safety and accessibility.

As for rail, we could dedicate a whole debate to station access. Stations absent of rumble strips on their platform edges and those with poor signage are failing the test. My trip to Biggleswade station highlighted how making such adjustments would mean that not only disabled people, but elderly people and mums and dads with pushchairs could use the train. Just 20% of stations are currently step-free. May I congratulate Liverpool's metro Mayor, Steve Rotherham, and Councillor Liam Robinson, with their publicly owned trains on their publicly run network, on procuring an entire fleet of new trains that are step-free and accessible? It just goes to show what a publicly run service can achieve and why Labour will prioritise this issue—oh, and they have ensured that there will be guards on the trains.

I have to raise Govia Thameslink Railway's disgraceful pronouncement earlier this year about dwell times at stations. That was another of its failings, and another reason that the Secretary of State should bring that route back under public ownership. It instructed staff:

"DO NOT attempt to place PRM"—

a person of reduced mobility—

"on train if there is a possibility of delaying the service",

and that someone having a seizure should be moved

"from the train as quickly as possible".

This is completely unacceptable. It boasted that such

"processes will help us deliver a 21st century railway".

No they will not, and to discriminate so overtly shows just how unfit such franchise holders are.

Labour further understands that we need a real shift in engineering. I say to disabled people, "Become engineers", and I say to the Government, "Make this happen". When our engineers, designers and transport leaders have lived experience, then we can engineer in access for all. Others have to change, too. At a recent presentation, the Office of Rail and Road told us how it was content that one in five people were failed by Passenger Assist. That failure told us why we are not content with that organisation. Leadership has to be about ambition, and I was very surprised that the Minister said that her strategy would be delivered by 2030, which coincides with a date set by the UN, given how fast she could drive forward the strategy.

Leadership is about ambition, and that is why Labour believes that the public transport system can and should be transformed. With my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) at the helm—a man burning with ambition to create an economically, socially and physically inclusive railway—that will change lives, and that is what Labour Members will achieve when we come into government.

2.34 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), but I have to say that I was surprised by the tone of some of her speech. I have never previously viewed inclusive transport as an overtly party political matter; lavatories and lifts matter to us all. This goes

deeper than just lavatories and lifts, but they are important. As far as I am concerned, the inclusive transport strategy is something to be celebrated across the House.

I heard what the Minister said in her generous remarks about the great man, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). I should say that the codename for this report in my office is the Maynard report. I do not in any sense mean to denigrate the great work that I have no doubt the Minister will do in taking this forward. As she said, on this issue, she will be a fast driver for change. However, I think we should all pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys, who has a personal interest and passion in this area, which he has had and has evidenced throughout his career. I know that he feels particularly strongly about the accessibility of our transport system. In fact, he feels equally strongly about accessibility and transport. In the early years of this strategy, he was able to marry his two passions together, and the report is a testament to some very hard work both in the Department and in the ministerial team.

For those with disabilities, not being able to access work, visit family and friends, or pop to the shops is isolating and can only make disabled people feel more lonely. The inclusive transport strategy shows that the Government are taking accessibility very seriously. I was particularly interested in the section on those with less visible disabilities, which are easy to ignore—I am sure that we all do that—on a daily basis. From railways to roads and from air to maritime travel, I have no doubt that the strategy will help to ensure that all forms of transport are made considerably more accessible to disabled people.

In Banbury, we have been talking a lot about our transport network as part of our bid to become an age-friendly town. A community-led initiative recently ran a survey of older people in the town, and transport came top of their list of priorities. We know that we have an ageing population across the nation, and that many people are living longer with more complex needs. Ensuring that they are able to access public transport is an important part of their independence. We have made really good progress: 98% of buses in England now comply with the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations 2000, which is up from 28% in 2004. Audible and visual announcements are now commonplace, and the new £2 million fund available to provide further support to the roll-out of these announcements across the UK's bus network is welcome.

Many of my constituents have also benefited from community transport initiatives. Two years ago, residents in Wendlebury were pleased to receive funding from the Department for Transport's community minibus transport fund. The minibus is available for hire by all villagers and it provides a vital lifeline to those who find it difficult to get around. The volunteer community connect transport scheme is run by my constituent, Keith Davies, through the Banbury citizens advice bureau. He and his fellow drivers work with the Royal Voluntary Service to help the elderly disabled to get to a GP or hospital appointment, pop to the supermarket and meet friends or visit family in town. Its work is really valued by our community, and it is right that it should be celebrated.

Local councillors have also been working extremely hard to reinstate community bus schemes that had gone out of service. In Banbury, I particularly want to celebrate

Councillor Kieron Mallon, who has helped to reinstate the B1 Easington route via Kidlington Assisted Transport. Three other bus routes have been piloted—the B7a and 7b in Grimsbury and Poets Corner and the B8 in Hardwick—and I am hopeful that they will become regular routes. We know that outside the inclusive transport strategy the Department is currently looking at the use of section 19 and 22 permits by some community transport operators. It is important that any action taken is proportionate and does not put any of these schemes at risk. We must continue to be proud of the support and help that the Government have given to community transport services.

I am sure that, like me, many colleagues here this afternoon will have received lots of emails from constituents about pavement parking. Guide Dogs has run an effective campaign. We know that cars parked on pavements and other street obstructions can be problematic for people in wheelchairs, the partially sighted, guide dog owners and indeed people with buggies, whom the Minister mentioned earlier. It is welcome news that the strategy recognises these issues and that the Department will carry out a wider review of pavement parking laws.

Extending the blue badge scheme will also make a genuine difference to those with hidden disabilities. The scheme has worked well, but I have long campaigned for temporary blue badges for those who have had an operation or broken a leg, for example. I have talked to the Minister about that before, and no doubt I will again. This great scheme could be more flexible, but in general it is to be celebrated.

I also welcome the strategy's commitment to fund Changing Places lavatories at motorway service stations in England. In Banbury, we know how important these facilities are, even though we do not yet have one. Cherwell District Council has been exploring potential sites for a Changing Places facility over the last few months, and I really hope that we will be able to build one soon and that disabled people will not have to hang on much longer. Ensuring that adults with acute learning and physical disabilities have fully accessible toilets is really important. The £2 million fund to install facilities in motorway service stations will help to ensure that disabled people and their families can travel more comfortably and without worry.

There are many aspects of the strategy that I have not been able to touch on today but which are also extremely welcome to my constituents. I congratulate the Department on taking decisive action to open up our transport network so that it is accessible for all. Everyone deserves the right to travel confidently, easily and without extra cost and worry.

2.42 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I am delighted to speak in the debate, although the opportunity has come around rather sooner than I expected, so I am afraid that my speech is in the form of a large pile of Post-it notes. I apologise if it is a little disjointed. I welcome the Department's work on an inclusive—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I made a mistake. I should have called the Scottish National party spokesperson. Does the hon. Gentleman wish to speak now?

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP) *indicated dissent.*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Okay.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), who is a valued member of the Transport Committee, for allowing me to continue.

I very much welcome the Department's work on an inclusive transport strategy and the opportunity to debate these issues. We know that disabled people are often reliant on public transport, and much of my speech will focus on that. As the Minister said, disabled people face difficulties due to the accessibility of transport, its cost and attitudes, and as I have said already, many measures that can make public transport more accessible for people with a disability also make it more accessible for everyone. Audio-visual announcements on buses, which are standard in London and, I am pleased to say, available on almost all buses in my city of Nottingham, not only are essential for someone who is blind or visually impaired, but help everybody using the bus, particularly if they are visitors from out of town or going on an unfamiliar route. If people can hear what the next stop is, it helps everyone. We look forward to having visual announcements on all trains in the future. As people get older, they often experience greater difficulties with mobility and hearing, and with an aging population, addressing such issues becomes ever more pressing.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) talked about pavement parking. Guide Dogs has done important work to raise the profile of that issue and the problem it poses to many people with a disability, so I hope that the Minister will tell us when we can expect to see some change. Pavement parking was the subject of a private Member's Bill some time ago, when the Government promised to act, so I would be grateful if she could give us a timescale. I also welcome the work around shared spaces, which is another issue that Guide Dogs and other organisations regularly raise on behalf of people with visual impairments.

Eddie Hughes: Does the hon. Lady also welcome the Government's pledge to get 1 million more disabled people into work by 2027, and does she think that the inclusive transport strategy will help to achieve that?

Lilian Greenwood: Of course I welcome the commitment to getting more disabled people into work, but my concern is whether the Government are doing enough on a range of issues so that people have the support that they need to get back into work. Perhaps that is an issue for another day, but the availability of accessible and affordable transport certainly plays a key role in ensuring that disabled people can access the workplace.

Funding for these measures is really important, but sadly there is a problem in my city at the moment. In September, Nottingham City Council changed the rules for the concessionary pass for people with a disability. Until early September, disabled people could use their mobility pass before 9.30 am, which was a huge assistance not only to disabled people in work, but to many who would be travelling to attend hospital and other medical appointments. As a result of the funding reductions that the council has suffered, it has had to go back to the national system, which says that passes can be used only after 9.30 am. That enormously regrettable decision is having a significant impact on disabled people in my constituency, although I understand why the council made it. This is about the availability of resources as well as policy.

[Lilian Greenwood]

Another local issue—I wonder whether the Minister is aware of this at a national level, and whether it is a problem in other places—relates to payments for on-street parking through parking meters. Increasingly, meters that allow people to pay by cash are being replaced by services such as RingGo, which involve people paying for their parking by telephone or using their smartphone. I am concerned about the impact of that on older and disabled people, particularly those who are deaf or have a hearing impairment. Has the Minister considered that issue and asked local authorities that are implementing such changes whether they have properly considered the impact on disabled people?

I will come on to speak about a number of individual modes of transport, but people going on journeys do not think, “I’m going to take a bus journey and a rail trip, and then I’m going to walk.” People think about getting from their starting point—perhaps their home—to where they wish to go. We must ensure that there is joined-up thinking, because a disabled person needs to be confident that every leg of their journey will be reliable and accessible. What action is the Minister taking to ensure that there is the joined-up and integrated approach that a disabled person will need if they are to have the confidence to travel? Unfortunately, we know that many disabled people are stopped from travelling because they do not have that confidence.

A report published in April 2017 by the Equality and Human Rights Commission stated that transport options for disabled people are “very limited” because of access and expense, and that disabled people report feeling “trapped” by high costs and limited options. The report also refers to

“attitudinal or psychological barriers that prevent or discourage disabled people from using transport services. This could involve the behaviour and attitudes of some transport staff or concerns that people have about using transport, such as fear of crime, abuse or attack”.

Of course, those are not just issues for disabled people, as they often affect young travellers or women travelling late at night. There are many common issues that we can look to address.

Community transport has already been mentioned, and the Transport Committee’s first report of this Session considered the Government’s proposals on changing the regulations on section 19 and 22 permits. There is considerable concern among Members on both sides of the House about the potential impact of the Government’s changes. Indeed, it is not just a potential impact, because the Government’s actions in July 2017—that was before the Minister took responsibility for community transport, which is a recent development—have already started to have an impact on community transport operators. I wrote to the Minister only a couple of weeks ago to express concern about the actions of some local authorities, traffic commissioners and police. That is happening even though the response to the consultation has not been published and the Government have not issued new guidance.

When the Committee took evidence as part of our inquiry, we heard from hundreds of individual disabled people and the organisations that represent them. We were struck by how many people referred to community transport as a “lifeline”. I am sure that the Minister has

listened to concerns raised across the House. I hope that she will take them into account when she publishes her response to the consultation and act to protect community transport, which is vital for so many disabled people.

I know the Minister is passionate about buses and I have been heartened by our discussions so far, but there are a number of issues to raise. One concern that has been highlighted by the Campaign For Better Transport since 2010 is the loss of supported bus services, which in part relates to the reduction in funding for local authority services. Thousands of services have been cut or scrapped altogether as result of those changes, and the impact of that on people who depend on buses—they might be people on low incomes, older people, or of course disabled people—is a great concern. Ahead of the Budget, I hope that the Minister has had conversations with the Chancellor and put in a plea for appropriate funding for transport, and particularly for buses, which are so important to communities up and down the country. Those cuts have had a particular impact on rural communities and more isolated locations.

The curtailing of services can have a particular impact on disabled people. Last week, the Transport Committee held an outreach event in Leicester where we talked to bus users. One woman, who had been a driver in the past but due to having had a stroke was now a bus user, described how on one of her local services the number of stops had been reduced. Where the bus had previously stopped at the hospital, it now stopped at the bottom of the hill before it reached the hospital, leaving her with a difficult journey uphill to access a very important local facility. That is just one example of how services are sometimes curtailed in a way that has a disproportionate impact on disabled people.

Reference has been made to the importance of wheelchair spaces on buses. Everyone is of course aware of the potential clash between buggies and wheelchair users for that space. I pay tribute to Doug Paulley, who took this issue on and confirmed that disabled people should have access to them. I welcome the Government’s commitment to act, but I would like more clarity on when it will happen. We raised this issue during the passage of the Bus Services Act 2017 about 18 months ago, so it would be helpful to understand when further action will be taken. We do not want to see a clash between the needs of wheelchair users and those with large amounts of luggage or prams and buggies. We want to ensure that buses are accessible for everyone. There are some really good examples of bus design. Nottingham City Transport, in my constituency, has large banks of tip-up seats that allow space for two wheelchairs or a large number of parents with children in buggies, so it can be done. We need to ask some bus operators why they are not acting more quickly.

The same is also true for audiovisual announcements, which I have already mentioned. Another shocking example from our visit to Leicester last week was told to me by a young woman. Her friend, who is visually impaired, had got on a route that normally has audio announcements, even though it is not standard in that city. She noticed that there were no audio announcements, so she spoke to the driver who said, “Oh yes, we’ve turned them off because I find them annoying.” That is really shocking, so what action will be taken to ensure that that cannot happen?

Finally on buses, the Minister knows that I wrote to her about the importance of transport to hospital. Many of those who use an older person's concessionary bus pass use it to travel to hospital and medical appointments. I was really glad that, after I wrote to the Minister—alongside Age UK, which has done excellent work on this in its report, "Painful Journeys"—it appeared in the inclusive transport strategy. I just want clarification on some of the action that was promised. Has transport to hospital been raised at the disabled people and society cross-ministerial working group mentioned in the strategy? Is cross-departmental work currently under way? If so, what specifically is happening? What are the Minister's plans for ensuring that the commitments in the strategy on transport to hospital actually happen? Will they definitely be built into the evaluation framework? I am sure that she will address those issues when she sums up later.

Trains often dominate our discussions. I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I am hoping we have plenty of time for this debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I am sure you will not want to take more time than the Minister.

Lilian Greenwood: I will try to push on, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I have such a long list of issues to raise.

On trains and the disabled people's protection policy, we know that the Office of Rail and Road was looking at undertaking a review of the guidance. It stated that a consultation on draft revised guidance was planned for September this year and that completed guidance would be published by the end of the year. Will the Minister update us on what she knows about that work, because it was not published in September as planned?

On step-free access, I welcome the progress that has been made, but 202 stations out of 2,565 is simply not enough. What is the goal on that? Perhaps the Minister could clarify whether, when we talk about step-free access at 202 stations, that is from the train to the street or just from the platform to the street, because that makes a big difference. Step-free access is important, but I appreciate that it can be costly to implement. There are some much cheaper and simpler measures that can make a difference. Although it will not solve the problem of step-free access, one such measure is seating at stations. We have a "Take a Seat" policy across the city of Nottingham, and I have noticed that there is nowhere for people to sit down and have a rest at some stations. I noticed last week that people can sit down and have a rest at Euston station, but if they do, they cannot see which platform their train will be on. That leaves disabled people without very much time to get to their trains. Perhaps the Minister will raise that with train operators.

Another question is the accessibility of the rolling stock—the trains—for persons of reduced mobility. Currently, 78% of the rolling stock on our network meets modern access standards. That figure should be 100% by 1 January 2020. What assurance can the Minister give us that that will be the case?

I have already touched on staffing issues on trains and at stations. I was really pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mention the importance of attitudes to invisible disabilities. The TSSA's work on neurodiversity is particularly

significant. I am sure the Minister shares my concern about the report in *The Guardian* on Wednesday of the mum of a 17-year-old son who was humiliated by Great Western staff, who accused her of trying it on when she asked if she could take an earlier train because her son was overwhelmed by the station environment. Train operators need to do more to train their staff properly so that such circumstances do not arise.

The Minister alluded to the issue of taxi drivers who ignore customers in wheelchairs or try to charge customers more if they have assistance dogs.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that we must all be mindful of the needs of the visually impaired? A constituent of mine recently reported to me the difficulties he had with crossing roads safely after his guide dog surprisingly and unfortunately died. He relayed to me the challenges caused by cars that were badly parked too close together or illegally on pedestrian crossings.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that important issue about the experience that disabled people, including those with sensory impairments, face when they are out and about on our roads. In addition, some crossings do not allow enough time for people to get across the road. I am sure that the Minister has heard and will consider what my hon. Friend has said and that she will make sure that it is reflected in her final strategy.

I want to raise a couple more issues, one of which is about aviation. Many of us will have seen reports in the media of the experience of BBC journalist Frank Gardner on planes. At the moment, it is not possible to take a wheelchair on to a plane. Has the Minister looked into that, and when will it be addressed? Not entirely dissimilar is the question of taking mobility scooters on public transport. In Nottingham, many users of mobility scooters welcome the tram, because they can take their mobility scooter on to it. They do not need any assistance, because there is level-floor access; it is great. In some cities, albeit a small number, it is not possible to take mobility scooters on to the tram network. Three rail companies—Grand Central, Gatwick Express and Northern—have a total ban on mobility scooters. What discussions has the Minister had with them about improving the situation for those who rely on mobility scooters?

I want to mention a problem that sometimes arises for passengers on the railway who use "turn up and go". I understand there can be a lack of communication between the originating station and the destination station. Will the Minister tell me what she is doing to ensure that train operators are addressing that issue, to ensure that there is good communication between stations?

My final plea is for the Minister to do something about fares. As she will know, fares on public transport have been rising faster than wages since 2010. That clearly has a disproportionate impact on disabled people who rely on public transport and many of whom have lower incomes, particularly those who have suffered changes in their disability benefits. Will the Minister ensure that funds are made available to hold down the cost of public transport so that more people can have access to it, either because they need to or because they want to? We know that it has many benefits in helping us to tackle congestion and poor air quality.

3.5 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate on behalf of the Scottish National party, and also to follow the all-encompassing speech of the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood).

It goes without saying that, although transport is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, there is certainly scope for us to discuss areas of best practice. I note, for example, that the inclusive transport strategy recognises that the UK Government are monitoring policy developments on the part of the Scottish Government, and I believe that it is sensible to proceed on that basis.

I am sure Members on both sides of the House agree that when we discuss this issue, the views of disabled transport users must be first and foremost in our minds. Whenever possible, it must be the experiences of disabled people that shape the policy. Our role is to try to understand the many practical difficulties that disabled people experience in accessing transport, such as the lack of wheelchair-friendly taxis, poor dropped kerbs leading to bus stops, and long-outdated train stations that do not cater for those who need extra assistance.

Obviously we all recognise that disabled people should not have to feel socially isolated or be treated like second-class citizens, and it behoves policy makers, north and south of the border, to ensure that our various forms of transport are genuinely accessible. Indeed, progress has been made as we move towards the point at which all buses, coaches and trains must be accessible to disabled people. In Scotland the percentage of buses that are accessible or have low floors increased from 33% in 2004-05 to 96% in 2015-16, and figures published in 2017 show that 47% of taxis in Scotland were wheelchair-accessible.

That progress, however, has been too slow for too long. The transport section of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 included a commitment that all licensed taxis would be wheelchair-accessible by 2012. The taxi trade had 17 years in which to deliver that goal with the encouragement of Governments, but it did not happen. As time has passed, successive UK Governments have allowed timescales to slip and transport providers to relax rules contained in the Disability Discrimination Act.

I have been greatly educated on this subject by one of my own constituents, Councillor Jim MacLeod from Port Glasgow. Jim has been a tireless champion of disability rights. Over many decades he has learned, through personal experience and from helping others, just how incremental progress has been. In his expert view, the most pressing issues facing disabled people are cars blocking access to pavements and dropped kerbs; a lack of wheelchair-accessible taxis; buses having only one wheelchair space, which is often taken up by prams; no announcements on buses to let blind people know where the stops are; a lack of accessible train stations or railway staff to assist disabled people getting on and off trains; and a range of continuing issues relating to disabled people boarding planes. Other Members have raised all those issues today, so it is clear that they exist throughout the United Kingdom.

When reading background media coverage relating to this subject, I was struck by one particular story from Edinburgh. It concerned a wheelchair user who said

that she had felt “embarrassed and humiliated” when a bus driver refused to fold away an empty buggy, which would have allowed her to enter the bus. Another passenger then shouted at the woman, blaming her for the bus being held up. The passenger continued to snigger and demean the woman, which made her feel that

“some people are valued more than others.”

In 2018 it is truly shocking that anyone, particularly a wheelchair user, is made to feel like that for something as simple as entering a bus. This is not an isolated incident: it is alarming to note that disability hate crime in England, Wales and Scotland has risen dramatically in the last year. Further, research by disability charity Scope found that one in four disabled people have been prevented from using public transport by other people’s attitudes. In the context of the inclusive transport strategy I therefore welcome the UK Government’s commitment to launching a public awareness campaign in England and Wales to promote ways in which members of the public can positively interact with disabled people to encourage a supportive travelling experience.

In Scotland, too, we have learned the lessons of the “letters from Scotland” campaign in an effort to highlight hate crime and to send a message of solidarity and support to those on the receiving end of such abuse. Such campaigns are vitally important because there is no point in having the latest accessible buses or newest technology only for disabled people to be put off traveling because of intolerance from passengers or transport staff. If we are serious about tackling the disability employment gap, we must be moving towards the point where disabled people accessing transport is just an everyday, unremarkable, mundane occurrence. Sadly we are not at that point yet.

Undoubtedly, new technologies will play a part in making transport more accessible, and might even revolutionise how disabled people are able to move around the community. I recently met with BMW who showed me some of their work in the field of automated cars. Their vision is impressive, but emergent technologies like fully automated vehicles are still a long-term aspiration.

In that regard, it is important that we are realistic about how disabled people use technology. Polling by Scope found that disabled people are far more likely to use “mainstream” technology than “specialised” assistive technologies. In a sample of 2,000 disabled people, 78% said that mobile technology was helpful or very helpful in helping them live more independently. Some 65% on the other hand indicated that they either did not use assistive technology or did not find it helpful. I hope digital companies therefore realise the excellent market potential in developing technologies that can assist disabled people in travelling. In this instance, both the developer and the consumer have much to gain from the implementation of new technologies.

3.12 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): On 6 June I had the opportunity through an Adjournment debate to raise the issues brought to me by my constituents Margaret Ambaras and Laurel Holleran, who are blind and partially sighted. They and their colleagues took me on a blindfolded walk which allowed me to experience the difficulties they have to face. In that debate I highlighted to the Minister, who is also responding to this debate, a number

of issues that they raised with me, some of which have again been referred to today. Those issues are pavement parking and shared spaces and issues to do with taxis, accessible information on buses and safety in travelling.

In that debate, I was able to explain the problems they were having and asked the Minister some specific questions about pavement parking and guidance on shared spaces. I am very disappointed therefore that pavement parking gets barely a mention in the inclusive transport strategy and action on it is again put on hold.

Ms Ghani indicated dissent.

Liz Twist: The Minister shakes her head, and I will be glad to hear her comments on that. Action on pavement parking is still being considered as it has been for some time. What was highlighted in that earlier debate was a need for a policy not just in London, but across the whole of the UK, to allow for pavement parking to be banned and to be the exception rather than the rule. My constituents Laurel and Margaret, along with Guide Dogs and other organisations, will be very disappointed that that issue has not been tackled, because it is very important for them. It really affects their ability to get around and to make the whole journey by walking from, for example, where they live to the railway station, the bus stop or other locations. It is really sad that we have missed this opportunity to do something very immediate to resolve that problem. As the Minister will recall, local authorities are keen to have guidance on this issue so that they can tackle it.

The issue of shared spaces is considered in the inclusive transport strategy, and it is good that the Government have put a pause on them, but as others have said, there is no clear guidance for local authorities on retrofitting shared spaces to ensure that they are safer for people with disabilities of all kinds, particularly those who are blind or partially sighted. It will be interesting to hear from the Minister exactly what is going to happen now. What are we going to do? Are we going to ban shared spaces, as many people with these problems would like to see, or will there be guidance on exactly how to make the existing ones safer? Looking to the future, how are we going to ensure that people with disabilities are able to cope with them? I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on that.

In the debate, I also asked the Minister whether the Department would issue statutory guidance to licensing authorities on disability awareness training. It is clear from my constituents' experiences that such guidance has not always been available. I note that there is a reference in the strategy to providing such guidance, and that a working party is looking at the issue, but as I understand it, the Government have not responded to the working group's report on this aspect. That is disappointing as well, and I wonder whether the Minister could update us on when we are likely to get a response on that issue.

I also asked the Minister about accessible information on buses. This is already provided in some places, but as others have said, it is sometimes switched off and it sometimes just does not work. That is something that really needs to be tackled, but I note from the report that it has been deferred to the end of the year for further guidance to be issued. Will she also comment on that?

The Minister was kind enough to write to me after the debate about the issue of guards on trains. This has already been referred to many times this afternoon, because many people with disabilities are really concerned that there will no longer be guards on trains. They have relied on those guards to help them in the past, and their presence is a key part of ensuring that people with disabilities feel safe on trains. The Government have to reconsider their position on this, because it is so important to so many people. Again, this is a missed chance.

I know that the Minister understands the importance of some of these issues because, as she said in my Adjournment debate, she herself has had experience of them within her family. However, I am really sorry to see that pavement parking has been sidelined. Other issues that have been mentioned today include the importance of bus services to people with disabilities. My constituents Margaret and Laurel have told me about the importance of bus services to them, so it is really disappointing to see the number of bus services being reduced nationally. We are seeing bus services disappearing in my own area, where funds are stretched, and I know that that is happening across the country.

Another issue that we talked about in that debate was accessibility on trains. As other Members have said, this is not just about step-free access in stations; it is also about being able to get on a train. In my case, when I get the train in Newcastle, I have a struggle to get on it because there is a huge gap. What steps are being taken to ensure that there is funding to make our stations and our trains properly accessible?

At this point, I should refer to my constituent Catherine Nichols, a young woman with a number of disabilities, some of which are visual and some of which relate to her mobility. Catherine never ceases to remind me of how important it is that people like her and those with other disabilities are able to get on a train and that trains are suitable for them to use safely. We need to pick up on such issues, but it seems that money will be a real restriction on any improvements, but I want accessibility to be improved, so money is necessary, and other Members have asked the Minister to raise that with the Chancellor.

We cannot ignore the issue of pavement parking, as raised by Guide Dogs and my constituents, any further. The matter has been put off and put off, but it needs resolving because it is hampering people's ability to get where they need to be and to use accessible transport. The issue needs to come to the top of the pile and be addressed as a matter of urgency.

3.20 pm

Rachael Maskell: As expected, we have had an insightful and thoughtful debate about how we must absolutely remove the barriers that have been created across the transport system, which have disabled 14 million people across the UK who experience some form of impairment. I thank all hon. Members for highlighting their concerns, their cares and their local examples. Each case tells a story of how communities have been denied access to transport and, therefore, to the opportunities enjoyed by so many of us.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) extolled the transport system in Oxfordshire, but it is alarming to learn of the level of cuts made by the Tory-run Oxfordshire County Council. The impact on

[*Rachael Maskell*]

the buses has been of such a scale as to garner national media attention, showing that the Government's austerity plan is still very much alive.

As ever, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) gave us a tour de force as she took us around the different modes of transport in her constituency, eloquently setting out what needs to be done and highlighting Nottingham City Council's dedication to increasing disabled people's access to transport. Like her, I regret the fact that the cuts that her council has faced mean that it is not able to offer disabled people the ability to use their passes at peak times. I hope that the Chancellor will give her some hope on Monday. The intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith)—I was sorry to hear about the loss of his constituent's dog—highlighted how important it is that road users and planners ensure that vehicle parking does not create more barriers.

The hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) highlighted the progress made by the Scottish Government, who are moving far faster on initiatives than the UK Government. He mentioned how his constituent Jim MacLeod had alerted him to the barriers that disabled people face. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) again spoke about her experience as her constituents Laurel and Margaret took her on a tour of her constituency to highlight the barriers that visually impaired people face. She also spoke of the essential role of guards on trains. Following all those contributions, there is clearly much to be done.

Communication was a theme in today's debate. Whether in person, by providing information or through the latest technology, it is important that we are able to communicate with disabled people to enhance their experience of the transport system. We have heard about the different modes of transport that are available, but if we bring modes of transport together at an interchange, we must ensure that those choices are available to everyone, including disabled people. It is vital that we get the maps and apps right and that we extend the opportunity to access transport to everyone. The challenge before us today is to take advantage of all those opportunities and technologies through the work of our dedicated transport workers.

Labour sees transport interchanges as a real opportunity. We have heard how people can be disadvantaged by stations not being accessible, and therefore we need to bring about redress. The historical franchises should employ disabled people and, of course, under our national railway plan we would not have to wait years until franchises run out. We could make those changes and make a difference to disabled people.

We have heard about the impact of different environments, about people who struggle in crowded environments and perhaps require additional support. I was heartened when I met London North Eastern Railway a week ago, as it now employs an access and inclusion manager, Charlie Woodhead. I look forward to working with him, and it shows what can be done by a publicly owned railway service. I hope others will follow that example.

Making transport accessible means that more people can travel. Having more people travelling on public transport is better for our environment, and it is better for everyone economically, for the individual traveller and for the Treasury.

Of course everyone should have the opportunity to book in advance, and it is a positive advance if systems can retain information about a traveller's support needs. However, everyone must also have the opportunity to turn up and go, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South said. That is clearly where transport is failing, and I trust that, significantly, the strategy will mean that everyone can have equality of access to our transport system.

As I said in my opening speech, 14 million people depend on the Government getting this right. My hon. Friends and I have set out how planes, trains, ferries, buses, cycling, walking and other modes of transport can be accessible. My hon. Friends are determined to see barriers removed, lives transformed and opportunities unleashed for all those who experience barriers today, whether economically, socially or physically. A Labour Government will ensure that they have the opportunities they deserve.

3.27 pm

Ms Ghani: With the leave of the House, I wish to thank the House for the opportunity to discuss this important inclusive transport strategy. The debate has been good natured, and both sides of the House clearly agree that the strategy is a positive and ambitious programme, but of course there is always more to do to help disabled people and older passengers to access our transport system.

I am pleased to note that this might be the first time an Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson has welcomed the Government's work, and I look forward to working with Members on both sides of the House to deliver the inclusive transport strategy. We have also heard some powerful stories about how passengers have been undermined, have lost their confidence or have been made to feel incredibly small when all they were trying to do was undertake a journey. That is just not acceptable, and we hope the inclusive transport strategy will address that in some part, especially in addressing the level of training that has to be undertaken by so many people involved in our transport network.

Transport is an essential part of our society, especially through its ability to help us to access work and school, and to stay in contact with friends and family. Through those connections, transport reduces feelings of social isolation, anxiety and loneliness. Transport should be easily accessible, and it is essential to helping to build a stronger and fairer society and a stronger economy. I hope Members will agree that the inclusive transport strategy is bold and shows not only my commitment but the commitment of the Department for Transport to building a more inclusive transport system—a transport system that provides good customer service, that gives disabled people the confidence to use it and that provides information in a range of formats to support journey planning and unexpected changes along the route.

I now wish to discuss some of the valid contributions made by Members from across the House. First, let me deal with the points raised by the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), because she asked so many questions. It would be near impossible for me to answer all of them, so I hope she will allow me also to respond in writing. She made a request for further clarity on what the Government will be doing

on wheelchair spaces. In my time at the Department, I have always been clear that a wheelchair access space is for wheelchairs, but I accept that further training is required for some people to empower them to ensure that they can deliver that advice and guidance when they undertake their day-to-day job.

An expert stakeholder group was established and has advised Ministers on a combination of amendments to legislation and guidance and in March we accepted those recommendations. We will also bring measures forward by the end of the year. Fundamentally, this involves much better training and understanding, in order to enable people to apply common sense.

The issue of community transport was raised, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis). I agree that community transport is vital, especially in the most rural constituencies; we have fantastic volunteers doing phenomenal work, be it with younger or older people, across the spread of community transport provision up and down the country. A consultation has indeed taken place and we are aiming to publish our response as soon as we can—I hope it will be in the next couple of months. It is vital to remember that clear guidance has been given by the Department to ensure that local authorities are not stopping taking contracts, and I am having as many conversations as I can to ensure that. Community transport is incredibly valuable and we need to make sure that any guidance we give lands appropriately; sometimes we may not fully calculate the language we use, but our motivations are to ensure that local community transport groups can continue to provide a service for the communities they wish to serve.

The hon. Members for Nottingham South and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) raised an important point about joined-up travelling, because people can set off on a journey only to find that things do not work out. They want to be able to ensure that their next mode of transport is available. Through the inclusive transport strategy, we are going to set up a transport leaders scheme that enables all the modes of transport to communicate with each other. One of my ambitions is for passengers to be fully up to date. Any piece of equipment, app or whatever this becomes has to be linked up. Whatever journey someone is taking and whoever is taking care of them, they should be able to communicate with the next person on that journey and with the person who may or may not be receiving them at the end of that journey. That is the challenge I have set the sector and that is what I am going to be working towards the sector delivering.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South also asked how often we discuss various modes of transport at the inter-ministerial group on disability and society, especially in respect of looking at community transport, and at transport to and from hospital and medical appointments. I assure her that I raise all these issues, including with the planning department that sits on the group, which discusses where bus stops are allocated, whether they are on the wrong side of the road for people who are getting off, whether they are near hospitals and so on. I also talk to the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that it fully understands how these services should be procured, taking into account the needs of passengers at all times.

The hon. Lady also asked for statistics on Access for All. We have allocated £300 million and we hope that we can do as much work as we can, as swiftly as we can. Figures to the end of 2017 suggest that more than £85 million has already been spent on Access for All projects, and we have £300 million in place now. All those projects that were deferred previously will now be assessed for the new Access for All funding.

The hon. Lady also referred to pavement parking, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury—*[Interruption.]* Forgive me, it was the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). The issue has been tackled by the Department, and one of our Ministers is gathering evidence on the effectiveness of the current pavement parking laws. We are considering changes to the law and listening carefully to concerns raised by campaigners. There is a commitment to ensuring that we can put out the review by the end of the year. In all the decisions that we make, we have to make sure that we reflect everyone's concerns and do not make fast decisions that might cause adverse reactions in local communities.

An important and valid point was made about parking meters that require people to use their phones, so I shall take that away and ensure that we pick up on it. We will see what we can do with the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee and other disability groups that we work with, and ask whether people not having an app, or being unable to use an app or to do whatever they need to do, is causing an issue with parking. We must make sure that parking is accessible for everybody, so I am grateful that that point was made and will make sure that it is tackled.

Let me respond to some of the issues raised by the hon. Member for Inverdale—

Ronnie Cowan: Inverclyde.

Ms Ghani: I am awful at reading and writing, aren't I?

We have assigned £2 million to public awareness campaigns and we will ensure that we can tackle not only the sector that has to deliver the service, but the public. It is not right that we hear stories of people's inappropriate behaviour, or of individuals—whether they are bus or train drivers—who are employed to deliver a service but just make really poor decisions. I hope that the inclusive transport strategy can deliver confidence among people who are disabled so that they can undertake journeys and are not deterred by one bad journey. We do not want to put anybody off, so I am really pleased that the debate was not negative at all and was about making sure that people can feel positive about leaving their home and undertaking journeys.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury started her speech by saying that lavatories and lifts are not celebrated enough. I am keen to hear how she will continue to celebrate them throughout her tenure as a Member of Parliament. She spoke about the wonderful community transport work that is being done in Wendlebury and the bus routes in her constituency. As I said, we will undertake a review of pavement parking. She spoke about the importance of the blue badge scheme going beyond what we accept as disabilities in the traditional sense and accepting lots of other disabilities, as well as about the importance of Changing Places facilities. Such facilities are something that we do not come across until we need them or become a carer for someone

[Ms Ghani]

who does, but they are vital. We hope to have facilities in place in most service stations in the country. My ambition is for them to be in place in all service stations, but unfortunately ministerial ambitions and budgets have to sit side by side. With that programme of work, it is important that the decisions are not made within the Department; we are working with Muscular Dystrophy UK to make sure that the right decisions are made.

I cannot let the debate end without talking about our passion for buses and for doing what we can to make sure that bus patronage goes up. There are variations up and down the country. There are fantastic places, from Liverpool to Brighton, where bus patronage is up. That is mostly down to the services provided, with up-to-date information and journey times that are sort of guaranteed. People are able to use technology on buses, and there are concessionary fares or cheaper fares for younger people. It is really about understanding the customer base. We have around £1 billion for local authorities to support concessionary fares, whether for disabled people or older pass holders. I am always campaigning for more funding for buses. It is vital that we have one place, one direction and one strategy, so I am keen to work with my Department to put together an investment strategy that focuses on bus services today and tomorrow.

Hon. Members' references to taxis and private hire vehicles ranged from the illegal behaviour of not allowing guide dogs into cabs to the question of how we raise standards. Reference was also made to the task and finish group, which did indeed produce its recommendations in the summer. I am in the process of putting together the Government's response, but Members can rest assured that issues relating to what is already illegal are fully understood and that standards throughout the country will be good and not varied, as they are currently. There is not too long to wait for that.

Some comments were made about aviation. We all hear dreadful stories of wheelchairs being broken or not arriving on time, and of passengers not being dealt with. The Department has been working hard with not only the aviation sector, but the disability groups that we work with, take evidence from and consult. An aviation strategy consultation will be produced by the end of 2018.

Cracked pavements were also mentioned. I am surprised that my constituency was not mentioned, because this matter comes up quite a bit, even in Wealden. The Department has a substantial amount of funding for highways maintenance. I believe that an investment of £3.8 billion between 2016-17 and 2020-21 will address the matter, but the point is absolutely valid.

We heard that bus drivers were turning off audio-visual information. We are investing £2 million to make sure that that information is available, especially among smaller bus companies, because it is absolutely key for all people who use buses, not only those who are disabled. It makes no sense whatsoever to turn off that information. Once again, training is absolutely key in this area.

A number of comments were made about driver-operated-only and driver-controlled-only trains and levels of staffing. First, we must be aware that where those issues have been raised, such as on the Southern lines, there has been an increase in staff, not a reduction. We must also understand that driver-operated-only and

driver-controlled-only trains have been operating for a substantial amount of time. It is not always about having more people available; it is also about having the right people with the right training. It does not help if more people are available but they do not do the right thing by supporting passengers who have concerns about disability and accessibility. As this matter is often raised, it is important that people know that the motivation behind the inclusive transport strategy is to ensure that disabled passengers have a good-quality service. That is the primary goal of the strategy. Opposition Front Benchers need to decide whether to prioritise passenger experience, or whatever a union wishes to push. We need to establish whether we look at training across the rail network, including for drivers, or support union practices that may or may not get in the way of providing a better service for passengers. I believe that we need to focus on passengers, instead of on what the unions might be arguing for at any one point.

The inclusive transport strategy has not only a very ambitious plan, which will obviously continue to be in place, but a substantial amount of money behind it. We have £300 million for Access for All, which is about not just steps, but anything that a train operating company, in conjunction with the local community and the local authority, believes needs to be amended at a station or on a platform to make it more accessible. There is also £2 million of new funding for the Changing Places scheme, as well as £2 million for audio-visual information for smaller bus operators, which is backed up with training so that drivers do not switch it off when it is meant to be working. A substantial amount is also available for awareness.

I have set out what is happening today but, if I may, I will take a moment to talk about the future. Throughout the Government's industrial strategy and in all our major transport infrastructure projects, technology is absolutely key. We want to make sure that transport is at the front of absorbing any new technology that will enable us to provide the most efficient service possible. New developments such as autonomous vehicles and mobility as a service offer benefits to our economy and have a great potential to improve the options available to disabled people. It is important that we are always abreast of new products and services to ensure that we design the most inclusive transport system.

We also have in place the future of mobility call for evidence, which is focusing on technology's potential to help people to access and use transport. It is essential, as has been noted, that the designs developed are within the reach of all people, regardless of their disability. There is no point our running ahead and using technology from which people already feel excluded.

I thank the House for this opportunity to consider the important issues highlighted by the inclusive transport strategy. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members have been persuaded of not only my commitment, but the commitment of the Department, to improving accessibility for everyone on our transport network. I hope that that will not only make people's journeys easier but, fundamentally, increase their confidence to go about their lives in the same way as the rest of us.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the inclusive transport strategy.

M26 Closures

Motion made and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

3.44 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a privilege to be here, speaking on behalf of the people I represent and on a transport issue of which many people will be very conscious, given the events of recent weeks, but let me start by saying how sorry I am that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will not be intervening this afternoon. We will all miss the adventure and surprise of finding out what connection the M26 in Kent could possibly have to Strangford. Sadly, that will be for another day.

The M26 is a key strategic road in the south-east of England that helps to connect our country to our European neighbours, providing a reliable link to our nearest port at Dover. It also facilitates the significant east-west traffic flow through the county of Kent. Communities such as Ashford, Maidstone, and those I represent in West Malling and Borough Green, have grown and prospered because the road network provides superb links with the rest of the south, along the M25-M26-M20 corridor. Therefore, any plan that might prevent such good access would cause economic and social damage to the area and require significant planning and mitigation. A scheme of enormous scale—such as turning the M26 into a lorry park—would require lots of consultation to allow people to plan for alternative routes.

The Government plan to use the M26 as a lorry park. Now, this is a surprise. It would fundamentally change the lives of residents and businesses across Kent, but neither the Department for Transport, nor Highways England, has asked to hear the thoughts of those affected. I am pleased that the Secretary of State and the Minister, who I am delighted to see in his place, met me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) last week, and I am happy that we have a further meeting with our local councils next week. I speak for all in saying that we understand that contingencies have to be made for a no-deal Brexit, but this is not a workable solution. Now, this is not just not workable for west Kent, but for the whole country, as this is ultimately a national concern.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I appreciate the time that the hon. Gentleman has taken to highlight the issues in Kent and across the country. Does he agree with me—an MP representing a constituency in another part of south-east England—that there may well be particular congestion pressures on the south-east, as the problems that he described on the M26 spread to the M25, M4 and other neighbouring motorways, affecting all our towns and cities across the south-east of England?

Tom Tugendhat: Indeed; I am getting to that exact point, and I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman should make it.

When plans are developed for any area, local residents and businesses are expected to have their say, but that has not happened here. No information was given on why the closures were happening, other than for “central reservation works”. This phrase could realistically mean anything, and does not indicate the scale of what is

proposed. I checked with a few people, including local county councillor, Harry Rayner—a more assiduous representative of the community it would be hard to find—but I could not find anyone who knew about the central reservation works. Earlier this year, I had heard that the idea of using the M26 to store HGVs was being talked about as a vague possibility, which is why I wrote to the Secretary of State on 4 April to raise my concern about the wider effect that this level of disruption would have on the local strategic road network. I shall quote from the letter that the Minister has no doubt seen, but that others in the House may care to hear:

“I would be grateful if I could meet urgently with your team planning this to talk about the impact closing the M26 for a sustained period would have on the local road network and the villages which rely on it.”

This is hardly a surprising turn of phrase, but as no meeting was forthcoming, I wrote to Highways England about works on the strategic road network in Kent. The M26 was not mentioned in its reply.

As recently as three weeks ago, when I asked Highways England if there were any plans to use the M26 in the case of a no-deal Brexit, I was told that there were not, so I was satisfied that there were no plans to subject communities in the area to even more traffic nightmares. For months, I have told the people I represent that this would not happen, following assurances that I had received. I now feel that we have all been let down. Why was there no consultation? The Department for Transport and Highways England are publicly funded, and they should be held accountable for their decisions. To fail to consult the communities most affected by the scale of the proposal is unacceptable. The very least they can do is to apologise.

I am calling for a fundamental rethink of this idea, which would almost cut communities off and cause chaos across the whole area, particularly as there are alternatives outside Kent; I would like the Minister and his Department to explore these. I very much hope that he will have detail on this by the time of his meeting with me, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks and our councils next week. We need to explore how we keep lorries at their source rather than allowing them to park in Kent—neither their start point nor, indeed, their end destination. There is technology available and emerging that would enable this to happen. The M26 is not a lorry park and does not have to be used in this way.

Since the closures were announced two weeks ago, a lot of people have linked the proposal to the vote to leave the European Union, but Kent has actually been looking for a solution since Operation Stack plagued the county in 2015, well before the referendum, let alone the result. The impact of closing the M26 is severe, regardless of the cause. Take policing, for example. Our excellent police and crime commissioner, Matthew Scott, has said that pretty much every traffic officer in the county would be needed to patrol a closed motorway. This would create a huge hole in Kent police’s resources, with neighbourhoods nervous about losing their officers to cover for their colleagues. It is no wonder that Matthew thinks this is an unworkable idea.

The views of local people and representatives like Matthew matter because their local knowledge can provide real insight and solutions. For example, has anyone thought what happens to HGVs travelling north

[Tom Tugendhat]

on the A21, or south from the Dartford crossing on the M25? There are no slip roads on to the M26, so how would they join the queue? Do they rat-run through villages like Shipbourne to get to the junction? Sat-navs—which, as we all know, have caused many issues for lorry drivers and for people living on small roads in past years—will no doubt take lorries through small lanes that are unsuitable. Do they travel the wrong way on the M25, or go along the A25 through six air quality management areas in 18 miles? These 18 miles along the M25 and M26 are the longest stretch of motorway in England without a junction. The A25 runs parallel the whole way—a single carriageway almost everywhere, even through villages such as Borough Green that suffer the most with air quality and congestion. Borough Green cannot cope with more traffic, particularly large HGVs. Its air quality will suffer even more. It is a perfect example of why the problem needs to be stopped at source, rather than parking HGVs in Kent that then cannot proceed on to Europe.

Could using the M26 as a lorry park be mitigated? Possibly, but I want to know what avenues the Department has explored. Can lorries be kept at source? Will my hon. Friend the Minister look at utilising lorry-holding facilities before the Dartford crossing so that Kent does not have to bear the whole of this load? If not, how can the Government provide appropriate mitigations for communities like Borough Green and Platt on the A25? That question is perhaps the hardest to answer. It requires significant investment. Take the air quality issue. How can the Minister and colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs provide funds and suitable equipment to properly measure the impact? How can they make sure that Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council can enforce the statutory limits so that they are kept within? What additional powers will be granted? These are all questions that we do not yet know the answers to.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) joins me in the comments that I now make. Currently, when there is a problem on the M26, the impact stretches further afield, much further south and east of the motorway. For example, the A227 is the only realistic route in or out of Wrotham and runs over the M26. Congestion there leaves the village almost cut off, with a single track road to the west the only option. The conurbation of Wrotham—a wonderful and very beautiful village—and its neighbours Borough Green, Platt, Ightham and others understandably feels that it has been getting rough treatment recently. Its infrastructure is declining, when connectivity matters more than ever.

I want to try to make the lives of people living and working in these beautiful villages better, not worse, but traffic congestion and poor air quality remain problematic, and rail services are often unreliable and slow. I do not need to rehash the issues surrounding the Southeastern timetable changes, but added to the delayed start to Thameslink services to the City of London and compounded by the threat of a lorry park, villages could be cut off.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that this seems to imply that the Department for Transport simply is not

sufficiently well prepared for what might come about on 29 March next year? Is he aware that the Comptroller and Auditor General expressed concerns about the Department's preparedness last week to the Brexit Committee, when he said that the Department "has convinced itself that it is less risky than it actually is"?

Is it not time that the Department got on top of this issue, to avoid the very problems for the hon. Gentleman's constituents that he has set out so eloquently?

Tom Tugendhat: I thank the hon. Lady, the Chair of the Transport Committee, and I should also pay tribute to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). They have both taken up this question with great diligence. If she will forgive me, I am going to focus on the issue particularly relating to Kent, which is not only about Brexit. In fact, this issue is not specifically Brexit-related. It is, as we know, related to Stack, which happened before the referendum and would no doubt have arisen anyway should there have been any issues with crossing the channel. I will focus on the M26 rather than on wider issues, which she not only suggests but has done very capably through her Committee work.

It is worth considering the other implications. There is a planned 3,000-home new development in the area as part of the draft Tonbridge and Malling local plan, which is out for consultation at the moment and to which I urge those who wish to comment to respond as soon as possible. Should that be approved, it will put additional strain on local road and rail networks. Do an extra 3,000 families need hundreds of additional vehicles thundering down country lanes every day? I do not think so, and I would be surprised if others did.

Clarity, consistency and communication matter, especially for businesses. Take, for example, ALS Airport Travel in West Malling. Every day, its drivers make countless journeys from the Malling area to Gatwick. The combination of closing the M26 and the existing smart motorway work on the M20 will have a hugely detrimental impact on the business.

We have no faith in Highways England to manage two neighbouring works concurrently. It cannot even get the M20 scheme right at the moment. Lower speed limits, narrow lanes and full road closures are already forcing traffic on to local roads. Accidents are on the rise. We see the effect every day. Highways England's woeful lack of communication across any scheme sees closure dates change frequently and residents unsure of what it will deliver for them. It has happened already with the scoping works on the M26 last week. The motorway opened two days before it was planned to, which is great, but Highways England failed to tell anyone that it had happened. The Department and Highways England really must start talking to the people who are most affected by these plans.

Closing the M26 to hold lorries will impact public transport, too. In a rural area, where many people travel long distances to school, even the slightest delay in the morning affects the network for the rest of the day. Has the Department spoken, for example, to local bus operators about that? How will it ensure that children get to school on time? More pressingly, should the education of students in west Kent be impacted day in, day out, because the area is at a standstill due to HGVs preferring not to stop in the county and blocking our major roads?

One possibility that I would like to see implemented if this proposal proceeds is to relax the rules of the traffic commissioner to allow bus operators and Kent County Council to modify and change bus routes quickly. Some people, including me, have argued that 70 days' notice is too long already, but the Government have an obligation to ensure that public transport still works and to put into place changes that mean children can get to school on time and as stress-free as possible.

This is just as important for any other motorist, so can the HGV parking ban on Kent County Council roads, piloted in Ashford, be extended county-wide, and can the penalty be increased, with permission to clamp on the first offence as well? Without that, our roads will not have a chance of being free and available for local traffic to use. Sadly, clamping matters in this circumstance. Can roadworks on local roads be limited, too? I would like powers to be granted to Kent County Council to enable it to charge more than currently permitted under the lane rental scheme to limit works causing delays on the roads. This would require departmental approval and, I understand, a statutory instrument, but it is precisely the sort of change that needs to happen.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I could talk more about the further mitigations possible under part 4 of schedule 7 to the Traffic Management Act 2004, but I trust you and the Minister already understand my concern. There is an argument that, wherever disruption might occur, these ideas should be implemented. This summer, a sinkhole developed on the A26 in Maidstone, closing the road for months, and the whole of mid and west Kent suffered as a result. The highway network in our corner of Kent is not resilient, and this needs to be considered as well.

At yesterday's Public Accounts Committee sitting, the permanent secretary of the Department admitted that the works on the M26 would cost £30 million to £35 million and include hard shoulder improvements as well as the central reservation works. Can the local community also benefit from these improvements? Why not pursue a simpler solution and stop HGVs entering Kent in the first place? Why should it be the responsibility of the garden of England to turn into the parking lot of England? Most HGVs do not start their journeys in our county, so why not keep them at source, as they do in France?

I want to touch on a social issue that I know concerns my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks. The M26 is largely rural and it is far from any services. If lorries are parked here, how will drivers be fed and provided with water and sanitation facilities, and where will they sleep at night? Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council have clear statutory responsibilities under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, so why have they not been informed either? Both councils do a brilliant job across all services, and they are excellently run, with extremely capable leaders and officers. I am pleased that the Minister will meet us on Tuesday, and it is clear that any proposal on the M26 would require abnormally high levels of Government support for our local councils.

I want to help the Minister and his Department to find a solution to this problem. I welcome the wonderful benefits that the freight industry brings, but there must be a better solution than turning major roads in the

county into a lorry park. I look forward to his response and to working with him and local councils in finding such solutions. Before I sit down, I must extend the apologies of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks and my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford, who express their support, but sadly could not be in the Chamber this afternoon.

4.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this debate on the effect of the M26 road closures on local residents and businesses. I, and of course colleagues and officials, appreciate that this is an issue of great concern to him, on behalf of his constituents. I have met him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon). Knowing the very strong feelings that my right hon. Friend has expressed in public, it is a pity that he could not join us for this important debate and share directly with us the issues that my hon. Friend has raised.

I know that my hon. Friend has raised this with the Secretary of State, and he and I have of course separately discussed it. Let me be clear: the Secretary of State has apologised to my hon. Friend, and I would like to take this opportunity to apologise to him as well—and not just to him, but to his constituents and other affected parties—for the communication failures that have occurred in this case.

Before I respond to the specific points raised by my hon. Friend, it may assist if I set out some of the circumstances that led to the M26 road closures. The work on the M26 that my hon. Friend has mentioned is, as he knows, related to our wider efforts to improve arrangements for traffic management in Kent in the event of disruption at the short channel crossings. In that work, we have been very conscious of the need to do more to mitigate the impact of such disruption on his constituents and Kent residents more generally. The Government are seeking to avoid any repeat of the scenes in 2015 that he referred to and which all colleagues from that area will recall, when Operation Stack was deployed to address disruption—nothing to do with Brexit of course—at the border. This saw long-term traffic problems on the M20 and other Kent roads, especially local roads. It is precisely the point of the work being done now to avoid this kind of disruption.

Since 2015, there have already been increases in lorry-holding capacity at the port of Dover and at Eurotunnel. Highways England has also made improvements to the Dover traffic assessment protocol—known as the Dover TAP—on the A20. This protocol is used to manage any mild disruption to the flow of traffic to the Dover port area and has proved effective in reducing the risk of Operation Stack requiring to be activated. The Department for Transport, Highways England and other partners are currently working closely together and with local bodies, particularly the Kent Resilience Forum, to develop contingency plans for the complete replacement of Operation Stack.

It is important to be clear that Operation Stack has been superseded by Operation Brock. This new approach has been designed to ensure that, unlike under Operation Stack, the M20 will be kept open and traffic will continue

[Jesse Norman]

to flow in both directions at times of cross-channel disruption. Operation Brock consists of three phases, involving a contraflow queuing system on the M20 and holding areas at Manston airport and, if necessary, on the M26. The contraflow system on the M20 will allow lorries to queue between junctions 8 and 9 of the coast-bound M20. At the same time, other traffic will be able to proceed in both directions on one side of the motorway, with access to junctions.

This represents a significant improvement on previous deployments of Operation Stack, when junctions were closed and traffic diverted off the M20 on to local roads, adversely affecting local communities and businesses in Kent. It is estimated that the Brock contraflow will be capable of holding at least 2,000 HGVs, in addition to the 2,000-plus capacity that the additional spaces at Eurotunnel, the port of Dover and the Dover TAP provide between them. We will therefore have substantial truck-holding capacity while maintaining flow of traffic on the M20 at all times.

We are highly conscious, however, of the need to have even deeper resilience plans in case of levels of disruption that exceed even this capacity. The Government need to plan for all eventualities. In the event of this kind of disruption, which would only occur in exceptional circumstances, we have two further options at our disposal. First, the currently disused Manston airport stands ready to be put into service if needed. It has an enormous runway that can hold up to 4,000 lorries. Then, of course, on the specific subject of today's debate, plans have been in development for some months now to utilise the M26 to hold lorries should even further capacity be required. To be clear, neither Manston nor the M26 option would ever be deployed if the initial suite of measures had been successful.

These measures can be deployed discretely in response to a specific incident or in sequence as part of an escalation plan. The exact approach to this phasing is in the final stages of development with the Department's delivery partners. Our preference is for Manston to precede the M26 option, but of course if an emergency is called, any operational decision will be made by the gold command on the day. All measures will be available, with full operational plans developed, by March next year.

The specific points raised by my hon. Friend fall into a number of broad areas. The first is his point about engagement and consultation with affected parties and communities. He focused on consultation. As he is aware, we are already undertaking work on a longer term solution for a lorry-holding scheme. In June and July 2018, Highways England ran a series of public information events on the proposed way forward, and it is currently assessing the responses.

It is becoming apparent that a range of on-road and off-road solutions have received strong support, and those could offer maximum benefit for future network resilience. There will be further public discussion on more detailed proposals when they have been fully worked out, and our aim is for the improved arrangements to be in place by 2023.

Although there has not been a formal consultation on immediate contingency plans to replace Operation Stack, over the past year there has been extensive and

more or less continuous engagement. That included the meeting that the Secretary of State and I held in March 2018 with Members for Kent constituencies—as my hon. Friend said, he was unable to attend, but he referred to it in a letter that followed. At that meeting, the Secretary of State outlined his vision for the M26 being used in extreme circumstances as an extra resource. After my hon. Friend wrote to the Secretary of State on 4 April, I invited him to attend a tea surgery on 30 April 2018, and again on 21 May, to discuss our contingency plans. It is therefore not fair to say that no meeting was forthcoming—on the contrary, the normal procedure, which is to have a tea surgery to understand the problem and then to go deeper into it with officials, was available and offered at the time. My officials have also had numerous meetings—more than 40—with local stakeholders and Kent Resilience Forum groups over the past year. Other opportunities to discuss the plans have been available, and used by other Members in correspondence and parliamentary questions.

My hon. Friend refers to comments made by the PCC and Highways England, and there is clearly always the risk of miscommunication or misunderstanding. Highways England has been clear about the need to work on the M26 and its potential role as an option of last resort, and the Secretary of State has held conversations with key local stakeholders. I understand there is agreement on the work to be undertaken and the options that should be explored, but it is important to be clear that no one—certainly no one in my Department, or in Kent or any of the organisations involved—wants to put restrictions on the M20, to have to park lorries at Manston or potentially to close the M26. These are contingency plans. If there is major traffic disruption as the result of action by EU states, we need the best plan possible to mitigate the effects of that, and a plan that works for the whole of Kent and the wider UK economy.

Detailed plans on the system are being developed. My hon. Friend mentioned the wider impact of these measures, and work is being carried out to attempt to understand the nature of the flow of HGVs into Kent, to see whether that can be mitigated in the event of disruption. As part of that, officials are considering the impact on the local network, as well as on the M25. I recognise and share my hon. Friend's concern about this issue, but we must also consider what the counterfactual would be, and what would happen if lorries were not managed in a planned, co-ordinated and effective way. In the event that we had to close the M26, I appreciate my hon. Friend's concerns about the impact on Wrotham. However, it would at least benefit from keeping the M20 open, and we know that that is a much more important strategic road, with high traffic flows, including for local traffic.

My hon. Friend raised a question about air quality, and that is inevitably a facet of any congestion on the local network and will be considered as part of the broad assessment. Again, however, the counterfactual applies, and it is important to understand what the impact on air quality would be if we had major traffic disruption without these contingency plans. My hon. Friend asked questions about the involvement of district councils, and all district councils in Kent, including Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council, are members of the Kent Resilience Forum and have had the opportunity to get involved in the development of those contingency plans.

The M26 closures are the specific reason for this debate, and under advice, they were deemed to be necessary for the undertaking of survey work that, in this case, was not formally subject to prior notification and, as my hon. Friend noted, ended earlier than the stipulated date. However, I absolutely accept that, given the sensitivity of this particular issue at that particular time, a more proactive and tailored approach to advance communication should have been adopted. That is why I have issued an apology and why we are so clear on that. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State feels the same way. The closures should have been notified more widely.

The survey work undertaken included taking core samples from the central reservation area, checking structure heights, assessing the condition of the existing M26 Otford emergency access, taking measurements, assessing 4G signal strength and undertaking drainage surveys. Highways England has confirmed that further overnight closures on the M26 are also planned in November and December. They follow site surveys carried out on the M26 in October. During those closure periods, work will be undertaken to install crossover points in the central reservation, which can be used to direct traffic on to the opposite carriageway. Such crossover points are commonplace on motorways and major A roads across the country. Their purpose is to help Highways England to manage traffic flow during incidents.

The Government are determined to keep the road network moving at times of potential cross-channel disruption for local people, businesses and visitors. That is why we continue to work closely with Highways England and other partners on developing both short-term and longer-term solutions to Operation Stack. On 5 November, I will host a further roundtable with Members of Parliament for Kent constituencies. At that meeting I expect to update Members on current plans and will be happy, as always, to discuss longer-term issues and proposals. It will be another opportunity to help to shape our proposals as they go forward, and I hope that as many Kent constituency Members as possible will attend.

To conclude, we doubt that these contingency measures will be needed, but if they are, then we are doing the necessary planning. If we did have significant disruption at the border resulting in traffic disruption in Kent, then let us be clear there is no panacea and no cure-all, but we want to ensure that we can manage disruption while keeping Kent moving. It is important that we do that in partnership with the key stakeholders working through the existing Kent resilience arrangements. I look forward to continuing to work with colleagues and partners to ensure we are well placed to cope with any outcomes.

Question put and agreed to.

4.16 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 25 October 2018

[MR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day

1.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered international freedom of religion or belief day 2018.

It is a pleasure to introduce this debate. Thank you, Mr Walker, for chairing it—it is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship. International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day will take place on Saturday 27 October. I thank right hon. and hon. Members—particularly those who will make contributions—for coming along. The fact that we debate this issue annually does not take away from its importance. It is good to consider again where there are problems.

I thank the Minister and the Government for their actions to advance the right of freedom of religion or belief. The appointment of Lord Ahmad as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religious belief is very welcome. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has appointed more staff to its FORB team and, crucially, committed to developing a statistical database to track FORB violations around the world. Those are significant and commendable steps to advance FORB. I truly appreciate the efforts of the Government and in particular of the Minister, who I know will always speak out for those who have no voice. That is the reason we are here.

We are privileged to have Ministers who are so compassionate and committed to the cause of human rights. As I have said many times, I am thrilled that we have the right Ministers in the right place at the right time. I very much look forward to hearing the Government's plans for commemorating International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day and for defending and promoting that vital human right.

Unfortunately, despite the amazing work that has been done, there is much still to do. FORB violations are rampant and truly global. Earlier today, at a panel on Afghanistan, I spoke about freedom of religious belief and how religious minorities of all kinds are persecuted in that country. Other Members will speak about Pakistan, which I recently visited with the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) and Lord Alton. We had an opportunity to express concerns on behalf of religious minorities there, which we did with some fervour. I know she will speak about that.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman mentioned Pakistan. Bangladesh was of course formerly East Pakistan. Is he aware of the abuses of freedom of belief—I imagine there are abuses of freedom of religion, too—that take place there? The photojournalist Shahidul Alam was imprisoned for taking pictures of student protests. I know the Minister is looking at that case, and I hope he can give us good

news soon, but it is an affront to democracy. We cherish freedom of belief in this country, and such abuses should be cracked down on.

Jim Shannon: I absolutely agree. Wherever there are human rights abuses—abuses of journalists or whatever else—we should certainly speak out. I thank the hon. Lady for reminding us of that case.

Just today I tabled a question to the FCO asking whether it will make a public statement in support of a full, independent investigation into allegations of forced organ harvesting from prisoners of conscience in China. Others will speak about killings along religious lines in Nigeria.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Before the hon. Gentleman moves on from China, I am sure that, like many of us, he is alarmed by the recent BBC news reports that millions of Muslims in China are being interned, seemingly because of their faith and not much more. Although we rightly want to do lots of trade with China, does he agree that we should take that issue up at the highest levels with the Chinese Government?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for reminding us of that case. He is absolutely right. The stories in the press in the past few days have been horrendous. We have seen the establishment of what cannot be called anything other than stalags—concentration camps—where people are subjected in every way, emotionally and physically, to efforts to change their views. Those Uyghur Muslims are among the people we speak up for today. I chair the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, which speaks out for people of Christian faith, of other faiths and of no faith. I also chair the APPG on Pakistani minorities. I am particularly interested in the issue the hon. Gentleman mentions, and I thank him for doing so.

Closer to home—we should not take away from what is happening here—there has been a 40% increase in hate crime on the basis of religious belief in England and Wales, and it is reported that churches in occupied territories in Ukraine have been denied registration and declared illegal. I am sure hon. Members will discuss those issues in much more detail—I intend to give just a general introduction—but I raise them to highlight the grave importance of International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day. Now more than ever, we must come together to stand up for those who suffer intolerance and persecution.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I fully agree with him about the importance of speaking out for people of all faiths, in all countries, who suffer persecution for their faith. Does he agree, though, that we should celebrate the strength of multi-faith communities that live together harmoniously and the contribution that different communities working collectively can make to improving all our lives?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is good to remind ourselves that, around the world, many groups of different faiths celebrate together. On our visit to Pakistan, to which the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston will refer, we had an opportunity to

[*Jim Shannon*]

encourage faiths to come together. It is important that we recognise, as I am sure everyone who will contribute to the debate does, that there is a need to understand that although we may have different religious faiths, there is nothing wrong with us coming together and appreciating each other's faiths, thereby strengthening each other. It is important to do that.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Is it not also worth the House noting with concern that attacks on freedom of religion and Christian minorities are often a sign of worse to come? Regimes that oppress freedom of religion are likely to violate other human rights.

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Lady for making that point. We highlighted the persecution of religious minorities when we visited Pakistan. To illustrate her point, 13,600 people have been abducted in Punjab province, and there have been 2,900 rapes and 190 gang rapes of women. The level of sexual violence against women is despicable and bothers me greatly, as I am sure it bothers everyone else in the House. That is an indication—it starts with that and then goes on to everything else. The right hon. Lady is absolutely right, and the horrendous statistics back up her point.

Of course, protecting FORB not only is vital for individual welfare but plays a key role in preventing social instability. Although stability is a complex phenomenon, the case of Myanmar shows how unaddressed Government and social persecution of religious groups can explode into violence, undermining stability and creating humanitarian crises. Indeed, the UN specifies that discriminatory practices, or targeting communities based on their identity, is a key risk factor for atrocity crimes.

In September, the House of Lords International Relations Committee published evidence from the UN and the World Bank highlighting that “the tipping point for joining a violent” terrorist

“group was usually some sort of violation of law, or a sense of violation of law”.

That goes back to what the right hon. Lady said. That shows that making sure that human rights are protected can play an important role in ensuring stability and preventing violent conflict, which in turn is vital to long-term economic development.

The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs recently stated:

“Promoting the rule of law and democracy globally is key to developing the UK’s prosperity.”

In the short term, the Committee stated, the Government “will face conflicting priorities between human rights and other Government policies, especially trade deals.”

We need to be careful about those. The Committee continued:

“This may create short term conflicts, but the prioritisation of human rights is in the UK’s long-term commercial, as well as moral, interest.”

I hope the Minister can tell us something positive about that in his response.

Given the importance of protecting FORB and marking International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, I want to make five recommendations that might help in the significant efforts being made to advance FORB. I

will then briefly discuss FORB issues in several countries in south Asia and the middle east, namely Pakistan, India, Nepal, Turkey, Egypt and Iran.

My first recommendation is for Departments that are significantly affected by FORB issues, such as the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development, to produce strategic plans for how they can advance this fundamental right and for them to work regularly with Lord Ahmad to co-ordinate their work. That is important. Would the Minister be willing to encourage those Departments to develop such plans? Will he also push for FORB literacy training for staff, so that they can understand the religious dynamics and tensions that clearly exist in the countries in which they work?

Secondly, DFID operates in many countries that have severe levels of discrimination and violence towards certain religious or belief groups. In these countries, DFID could encourage more non-governmental organisations to develop programmes that promote the welfare of marginalised communities and help to reduce tensions between religious or belief groups in conflict. Would the Minister be willing to encourage and support DFID to take such action? I know he would—I know I am pushing at an open door, to be honest—but I want to put the point on record. Will he ensure within DFID that modules that teach respect for people of all faiths and none are included in more education programmes, as well as capacity building programmes for police, civil servants, NGOs and other groups? I will not steal anyone else’s thunder, but it was important to see the police and other departments in Pakistan working to ensure that these things happen as well.

Finally in this section, I commend the Minister for the Government’s role in developing country-specific strategies for advancing FORB. Will he continue to work with FCO heads of mission and DFID country heads to produce more of these plans for promoting FORB?

The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston, the noble Lord Alton of Liverpool and I made a trip to Pakistan; the hon. Lady will speak about that and I will let her refer to it, because it is important to do so. Religious minorities including Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis and other groups face very significant persecution in Pakistan and are severely marginalised.

When we were there, we visited some of the slums where the Christians, for example, were living. It is very hard, and none of us was not touched by what we saw. Any slum where any group lives is horrific, but we went to the Christian slum in particular, where there were 48,000 people living in 8,000 houses. It was quite unbelievable. I call them houses, but they were rudimentary. They were never more than a single block or a wooden frame with a carpet thrown over it. There was a single hose that ran through the slum, and open sewers. One thing about it, which the hon. Lady will speak about, is that the children were happy, smiling and clean. There was certainly a willingness to try to do something.

I do not do the pools, but if I did, or if I won the lottery, I would certainly give whatever money I won to do a project there. I have spoken to the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), and I intend to put forward some programmes

that he might be sympathetic to assisting out there for all those who live in slums—all those minority groups, whatever they may be. It is important to do that.

I want to comment quickly on the 5% employment quota for non-Muslim Pakistanis. It is all very well for the Government to set a 5% quota for religious minorities to achieve jobs, but if people do not have the education to get those jobs and achieve the goal, it does not matter very much. The Minister has kindly said that he will look at that as well.

I also want to speak about possible reforms to the criminal law to prevent the persecution of religious or belief minorities in Pakistan. I will not go into too much detail, because some of it has been highly confidential, as the Minister knows, but I will say that we had the opportunity to meet two of the three judges who will decide the fate of Asia Bibi, who has been in prison under a death sentence for eight years, separated from her husband and family. We need a law that does not penalise people or treat them adversely, because someone with malicious intent can make an allegation, which is clearly what we have seen in this case. We made those comments clear, although I will say no more about that, other than to say that the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston will comment on it.

Next, I will speak about the FORB situation in India. Despite Prime Minister Modi's pledged commitment to "complete freedom of faith", since his election in 2014 there has been a significant increase in anti-minority rhetoric and mob violence against Muslims and other minorities. Let us be quite clear: I am here to speak for every religious minority, as the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), who intervened earlier, knows. I am here to speak for all religious minorities, wherever they may be. We have spoken about the Uighur Muslims in China; we will speak about the clear persecution of Muslims in India. I want to speak up for those people as well and ensure that the Indian Government are aware of their commitment to international religious freedom through the UN. There have also been hundreds of attacks on Christians.

Worryingly, at the end of July 2018, in Assam State, the Indian Government effectively stripped 4 million people, mostly Muslims, of their citizenship, branding them illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. How annoying and frustrating is it to watch a democratic country specifically targeting those of other religious beliefs? The situation bears worrying similarities to the plight of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, who in 1982 also had their citizenship removed and were labelled Bangladeshi before being attacked by the Burmese military.

It is hard not to get emotional, strongly agitated and full of angst about what is taking place across the world, because there is so much happening. This debate is a chance to reiterate those points, and others will do so. All this is very concerning, not only for obvious reasons, but because violence and discrimination could cause significant grievance among the 250 million-strong non-Hindu population of India, leading to instability. Mob violence has already increased significantly across India, and in the past few months both ISIS and al-Qaeda have called on India's Muslim population—predicted to be the second largest, if not the largest, in the world—to "take revenge". We have a difficult situation developing in that country, and if the Indian Government do not start to do something about it, we are in great trouble.

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman used the phrase "across the world". While there are excellent organisations such as Christian Solidarity Worldwide that operate in this space, I have always been particularly struck by Open Doors' "World Watch List 2018". Going back to that phrase "across the world", is it not shocking that we can draw a line from the west coast of Africa all the way through the middle east to the Pacific ocean and in every single country along that route there is persecution of Christians? Does he think it might be a good idea if every Christian place of worship in this country had the Open Doors "World Watch List 2018" up in its hall or reception as a visual reminder of what some of our brothers and sisters in the faith have to put up with?

Jim Shannon: That is a salient reminder for us all. We have one in the Freedom of Religious Belief office here. I am regularly in contact with Open Doors and many of the other organisations—Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Release International and the Barnabas Fund—and our churches all have them as well. The hon. Gentleman will know this, but every morning in my and other people's prayer times, when we go around the countries of the world, there are 50 or 60 countries where persecution is rife. That is always a reminder to me at the beginning of the day of the freedom that we have here, and that others do not. He is right and I thank him for his intervention.

We had the ISIS-inspired attack in Madhya Pradesh in India, in which 10 people were killed. For the benefit of both India and its potential for a stable long-term relationship with the UK, we must take a stand against growing human rights violations there. I hope that the Minister can work with the Indian Government at least to make them aware that we are concerned.

I will speak quickly about Nepal. As the Minister knows, the Nepalese penal code 2017 contains problematic provisions that criminalise religious conversion and "hurting religious sentiment". Those words give the Government power to do a lot of things to persecute religious minorities. We have had reports of 20 Christians being arrested and four churches being burnt down. Where does this stop? The Nepalese Government receives some DFID funding and gets support from our Government. The laws are insensitive to the feelings of religious minorities and their positions, and we believe that the legislation relating to criminal liability for doctors, and the issue of arrest warrants, is completely irrational and illegal. There is an excellent opportunity for the UK to suggest that Nepal reconsiders its problematic provisions in order to stay in line with its obligations as a member of the UN Human Rights Council. Members of the Human Rights Council must adhere to its principles.

Turkey has become a difficult country. The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton referred to journalists, and Turkey's clampdown on journalists and the media has been atrocious. Pakistan has been asked to send 230 Turkish teachers back to Turkey to make them accountable and to have their rights taken away. I have written to the Minister suggesting that we do all we can to ensure that the Turkish Government cannot do that. An early-day motion in the House this week also refers to that.

Dr Huq: The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. Is he aware of another example of Christian persecution in the middle east: that of the American

[Dr Huq]

Quakers? Although they have an illustrious history of helping refugees of all faiths in the second world war and of hiding Jewish children, they are now on a banned list for travel to Israel. Does that not seem baffling?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing that up. I was not aware of that one, but we will certainly pursue it through the APPG.

There has been a surge in ultra-nationalist rhetoric across Turkey, alongside hate speech and incitement to violence against non-Sunni Muslims. Religious minority groups face growing harassment, and foreign missionaries have been arrested and deported. Most notably, in 2016 the American pastor Andrew Brunson was arrested, along with his wife, and accused of being a threat to national security—the threat being that he was a Christian in Turkey, preaching the gospel to people who wanted to hear it. Where is the threat in that? The European Court of Human Rights has made many judgments on those and other long-standing issues, such as the right to raise one's children in line with one's religious or philosophical views, the right to establish places of worship and the right not to disclose one's religious beliefs, but they have not been addressed by the Turkish Government.

Egypt may have fallen off the map a wee bit, but I could not be here without mentioning it. Egypt has many serious human rights issues, including restrictions on freedom of association, freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. In recent years, Egyptian authorities have used torture and enforced disappearance against hundreds of people, and dozens have been extra-judicially executed. In addition, last year more than 100 Christians were killed in terror attacks amid an atmosphere of continued impunity for sectarian violence. In November 2017 gunmen attacked a mosque in North Sinai, killing over 300 people—the deadliest attack seen in Egypt for many years.

In December 2017 the head of the Egyptian Parliament's committee on religion said that a new law was being drawn up to criminalise atheism. Well, the APPG that I have the privilege of chairing speaks up for those of Christian faith, of other faiths and of no faith, and that is contrary to what we believe in. The freedom to have one's own thoughts is very much part of a democratic society. That law seems not to have had much support, although that is probably because the Egyptian criminal code already has severe provisions that can be used to target both atheists and "apostates", to use their language.

It is important to highlight the plight of the Baha'is in Iran, as we often do in this House. While many religious and belief groups are persecuted by the Iranian regime, Baha'is are a particular target for official persecution. Since 1979, Iranian authorities have killed or executed more than 200 leaders of the Baha'i faith and nearly 1,000 Baha'is have been arbitrarily arrested in the last decade. Baha'is have been murdered simply for their faith.

I have a small but vibrant and particularly vocal Baha'i group in my constituency. I have attended their events, and I know they will be encouraged that the plight of Baha'is being mentioned in this House. They are often denied the right to higher education or prevented

from working, and often their lands or businesses are taken away from them. Despite the presidency of the supposedly centrist Rouhani, oppression of the Baha'is in Iran is getting worse.

Hon. Members will know how important FORB is to me, as it is to them. I was going to say that I should stop speaking so that others have something to talk about but, tragically, as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said, there is no shortage of topics to cover when we look at what is happening across the world.

FORB is a fundamental human right not only because of its importance to human dignity and flourishing, but because of the role it plays in preventing conflict and maintaining stability. I thank the Government for their commitment to this right and humbly suggest that, to advance FORB even further, the Minister should consider: producing plans to provide DFID and Ministry of Defence staff with FORB literacy training; encouraging the development of Government and civil society programmes that promote FORB; and working with FCO and DFID country heads to develop country-specific FORB strategies.

I am sure that those from Christian Solidarity Worldwide will not mind me saying that just this week an event took place in the House—many Members present attended it—on its toolkit for standing up for freedom of religion or belief. It has produced a really good publication—if the Minister did not get a copy, I will make sure that he does—which is a toolkit for all of us individually but also for civil servants and those in departments across the world.

Hopefully these recommendations can help make a difference for religious or minority groups in countries such as Pakistan, India, Nepal, Turkey, Egypt and Iran who are being denied their right to FORB. The sheer volume of FORB violations in those countries—and elsewhere, including the UK—points us to the importance of International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, which necessarily gives us the opportunity to come together and stand up for all those who are suffering, all those who are attacked, and all those who have to struggle and fight for something we take for granted. I come back to Pakistan where, as the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston knows, we went to church under police protection. By comparison, here in the United Kingdom we at least have the freedom to go to church and worship our God.

As parliamentarians, it is our duty to stand up for people, wherever they may be. To help with that, I direct hon. Members to the toolkit produced by Christian Solidarity Worldwide. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for coming to the debate. We may never meet some of the people across the world on whose behalf we are speaking, but today we have the opportunity to speak on their behalf.

1.56 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on a wide-ranging speech that covered many areas. I know colleagues will mention many countries of concern across the world; I will focus on what we can do here. Today, we are standing up in Parliament to say how important freedom of religious faith and belief is to all of us, as it

is to many colleagues who are not here. It is the responsibility of this country, faith leaders and indeed individual worshippers and people of no faith to stand up, regardless of their faith, for all those around the world who are being persecuted.

I was born an Anglican and worship in a Baptist church, so I call on the leaders of those Churches and of all faith groups in this country to get up every time there is a problem with persecution—there are such problems most of the time—and say, “As a Christian, I abhor the persecution by Christians of a minority,” or, “As a Muslim, I abhor the persecution of members of other faiths—Christians, Hindus or Buddhists—by a Muslim majority country.” I would like to see that, because sometimes, I fear, we are hot on looking at the persecution of people who share our faith—it is right and important that we are—but a little less vocal when it comes to the persecution of others. The hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned the case in China that has been highlighted by the BBC. It is vital that, as Christians, we stand up for Muslims who, reports suggest, are being targeted there.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. Does he share my enthusiasm for the European Court of Human Rights? Many cases have been brought to it by many different faith groups, and it has stoutly defended their rights. After all, it was born out of the second world war, which had a significant religious element—or an anti-religious element in relation to the Jewish faith.

Jeremy Lefroy: My hon. Friend makes a vital point. We in this country have sometimes—especially at this time—been a bit confused about the difference between the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights, so let us make it quite clear. I and everybody in this room, I am sure, would never want the United Kingdom to pull out of the ECHR or to resile from our signature to the European convention on human rights.

John Howell: That is a very good point. Another is that, as a member of the Council of Europe, I help to elect the judges to the ECHR, which gives that court a democratic legitimacy that no other has.

Jeremy Lefroy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We should make the point that the United Kingdom’s participation in the ECHR right from the beginning—we signed the convention after the second world war—is absolutely fundamental to who we are as a country. We need to maintain that and to not mix it up with other discussions about Europe, as I fear has happened even in my own party in the past, although not in the future, I hope.

It is important that all faith groups stand up for one another. I want Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs and atheists to stand together and fight for the rights of persecuted minorities, rather than raising concerns only if, for example, they are Muslims and Muslims are being persecuted, Christians when it happens to Christians, or Hindus when it happens to Hindus. It is vital that we all hang together in this, or, as somebody else said, we will surely hang separately.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): It is important that our debate is framed by that view, so am grateful for my hon. Friend’s wise words. Many people who engage themselves in this issue, but by no means all, come at it from a strongly religious—strongly Christian, in this country—standpoint. It makes life a lot easier for all of us, especially in the areas I cover as a Minister—Asia and the Pacific—when our high commissions and embassies are able to make the case that we are not specially pleading for one particular or predominant religion, but raising a general, human rights-related issue. It is important that we are able to do that. That was perhaps not quite the case in the past. I understand the strength of feeling, particularly in Christian communities, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) rightly pointed out, but this is a human rights issue that applies to all people of all religions and none, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford also rightly points out.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am most grateful to the Minister, who takes his role incredibly seriously. We are proud to have him in that position.

As Members of Parliament, we are honoured to be able to travel quite a lot. I encourage all Members, when traveling to another country—even if it is not part of their role, or they may be on a Committee visit—to meet people of faith or no faith who are being persecuted, or who are experiencing that sort of problem. I have done that on some occasions. I have also met people of minority faiths who are supported and do not have a problem. On a recent visit to Kosovo—a predominantly Muslim country, but one that has freedom of religion enshrined in its constitution—I was honoured to meet a Christian pastor to talk about that country’s serious problem with youth unemployment, which is running at 60%. He was very open about the way in which he was able to establish churches in that country and about the freedom of religion there. That gave me great comfort, but I have been in other countries where I have received less comfort from the reports of the minority groups that I met. Parliamentarians often have privileged access, and it is important that we use it to encourage those who are being persecuted or are under pressure, and to say, “We have not forgotten you. You are remembered in the United Kingdom and its Parliament.”

Some Governments that profess to offer freedom of religion and belief actually undermine it. The Foreign Office and the Department for International Development can advocate on behalf of minorities in relation to the methods used, which are often fairly technical. They include the development of the constitution and how it deals with what is often known as proselytising, or seeks to restrict the right to freedom of speech, which appears to be there but is actually not. Another such measure is refusal of planning permission for places of worship—it should be given, but reasons are found for it not to be, year after year. In the end, groups are forced to register to use temporary accommodation, or are not even able to meet together. Again, the Foreign Office, or DFID if it is working in the country, can say to Governments, “Hang on—you are not abiding by your own laws. You are discriminating against a group by not allowing them to establish a place of worship, even if it is permitted.”

Finally, although we know that Governments have little control over this, we need to look at the role of social media and how it enables the spread of fake news,

[Jeremy Lefroy]

such as the spreading of lies about people that results, in some countries, in their being lynched or murdered for something that they have not done. We should encourage Governments to take up those cases, to ensure that those who use social media for such terrible purposes are held to account judicially, and that the companies that enable those people are regulated in a way that we have begun to talk about here.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak, Mr Walker. I hope that this Freedom of Religious Belief Day will be the chance for people of all faiths—particularly their leaders—and no faith to stand up for all those who are persecuted across the world, and to not make exceptions for those with whom they do not share a faith.

2.7 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), not only for his excellent speech but for the tireless commitment he has shown to raising this issue in Parliament over the years.

The hon. Gentleman's knowledge and passion were extremely helpful during our recent trip to Pakistan, where we discussed many of the issues that will be raised by hon. Members today. I was very grateful to the Pakistani people for the warm welcome we were given and for the engagement and energy that we saw in every face in every meeting every day. They have hope and faith, and they are looking to us for help. We travelled from cities to slums, from the heart of the Supreme Court to the outskirts of Islamabad, and we consistently found people who recognised the significant scale of the problems faced and who are ready and willing to tackle these challenges.

Today, just two days before International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, is the perfect time for me to discuss some of the challenges facing Pakistan and another important nation—China. I begin with something that the hon. Gentleman mentioned: the recent BBC investigation into China's organ transplant industry. Last week, I attended a meeting about the persecution of a group I had never heard of before: Falun Gong practitioners. To say I was shocked and appalled by what I heard would be a significant understatement. Falun Gong is a spiritual practice that was outlawed by the Chinese Government in 1999. Since then, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reports that Falun Gong practitioners have been arbitrarily detained in their thousands, being regularly confined in labour camps or disappearing altogether. As if that were not bad enough, there are widespread, consistent and credible reports that China is forcibly removing organs from those prisoners to supply the vast, expanding and lucrative organ transplant industry.

Organ harvesting. I think we all need to take a moment to let the idea of that sink in. It is 2018 and we are talking about human beings—men, women and children—being treated like cattle, killed on demand for the benefit of others, and all because they practise the wrong faith. The Chinese Government of course deny that that is happening. They acknowledge that it used to happen, but say that it has stopped. I know that all hon. Members would very much like to believe that that is true, but the evidence suggests otherwise.

I refer the Minister to the 2016 report compiled by former Canadian Cabinet Minister David Kilgour, working alongside prominent international human rights lawyer David Matas and Ethan Gutmann, an award-winning investigative journalist. Their report is a meticulous examination of the transplant programmes of hundreds of hospitals in China. It draws on media reports, official statements, medical journals and hospital websites, and analyses information such as hospital revenue, bed counts, bed utilisation rates, surgical personnel, training programmes, state funding and more. Their research indicates that the Chinese regime is performing between 60,000 and 100,000 organ transplants a year—a vast discrepancy with the official estimates of roughly 10,000 a year. Where are the organs coming from?

The alarming discrepancy with the official statistics is not the only evidence—indeed, it is just the tip of the iceberg. For example, since 2000, Chinese transplant hospitals have quoted waiting times of between days and weeks for an organ transplant—sometimes even hours. To give hon. Members some context, the average waiting time for a kidney transplant in the UK or US is two to three years, and these countries have much longer established traditions of voluntary organ donation.

That evidence, combined with testimony from Chinese medical professionals, has led to reports by major news outlets across the world, including the BBC, CNN and *The New York Times*. Indeed, the evidence is so persuasive that it has led numerous countries across the world to condemn the practice and to introduce legislation to prevent organ transplant tourism to China. For example, in 2016 the United States House of Representatives passed resolution 343 on forced organ harvesting in China. That resolution

“condemns the practice of state-sanctioned forced organ harvesting in the People's Republic of China”

and

“demands an immediate end to the...persecution of the Falun Gong spiritual practice”.

Earlier this month, it was announced that a people's independent tribunal on forced organ harvesting from prisoners of conscience would begin in London during December 2018. The tribunal will be chaired by Sir Geoffrey Nice, who led the prosecution of Slobodan Milosevic, former President of Serbia, at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. I hope that hon. Members, including the Minister, will follow closely the work of the tribunal on forced organ harvesting.

The accusations are grave and difficult to believe, but does not their very gravity mean that we should do all we can to assess their validity? Should we not make absolutely sure that the claims are not true? Can we really say that we care about protecting freedom of religion or belief if we do not fully investigate such horrible reports? This Government have made very important strides against horrible practices such as modern-day slavery. Will the Minister agree to tackle this equally revolting practice? It is especially important now, as the Chinese Government seem to be expanding their persecution to Uighur Muslims. The UN has reported that 1 million Uighurs—innocent Chinese citizens; peaceful practitioners of Islam—have been detained in “re-education” camps in Xinjiang. Although I am a great believer in the importance of studying, I do not think that even I would want that kind of education. Also, *The Guardian* reports that millions of Uighur

Muslims have been arbitrarily detained for unwanted blood, tissue and DNA tests. Why? What could possibly be the motive for that? Given the evidence mentioned earlier, one could be forgiven for concluding that it is preparatory work for including Uighurs in the forced organ transplant system. Can we really stand by and not look into this?

I shall finish my discussion of freedom of religion or belief in relation to China by quoting a passage from a report produced in 2016 by the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission:

“This is an issue that emerged in 2006 and was initially met with official scepticism. Yet...the evidence has continued to accumulate, and the issue shows no sign of fading away. The United Kingdom should address it head on. Working with others within the international community, Britain could help commission an independent investigation to examine the size of China’s organ transplant industry...the United Kingdom could enact legislation making it a criminal offence to travel to China for organs. The UK Government should raise detailed questions about organ transplant processes and facilities with the Chinese Government, specifically around how waiting times for compatible organs are so short and where organs are sourced from.”

I hope that the Minister will take those recommendations to heart.

On my recent trip to Pakistan, I was shocked to learn about the ongoing persecution of another group that I was unfamiliar with until recently—the Ahmadis. The Pakistani penal code, which the Member for Strangford mentioned, is used to prevent Ahmadi Muslims from identifying as Muslims or even using Islamic greetings, although they are Islamic people. Ahmadis are routinely arrested arbitrarily on false charges of blasphemy and have been subjected to vicious attacks in public, including acid being thrown at them. Hundreds of Ahmadis have been murdered on grounds of faith. Ahmadis are also technically prohibited from voting, because to vote they are required by the state to register as non-Muslim, which many refuse to do.

John Howell: I have a lot of association with the group of Muslims the hon. Lady talks about. They came to my constituency and asked whether they could hold a meeting showing that the Koran was a book of peace, rather than a book of war, because they have a great attraction to the legitimate government system within a country. It was a fantastic event. I hope that the hon. Lady will, with me, endorse their great feeling for the British system, which they showed at that meeting.

Ms Rimmer: I will; I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is good that the Ahmadis felt that they could come. When people who have come from a country where they were persecuted have the faith and strength to go to someone who is completely alien or slightly alien to their religion, it gives some confidence that they believe in us and this country.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is not only in Pakistan where intolerance is being displayed towards these people. In Glasgow in 2016, there was a case in which a man travelled a considerable distance—I cannot remember how far; he might have come from the north-east of England. *[Interruption.]* It may have been Birmingham. He came to confront a newsagent in his shop and kill him—stab him to death—simply on the basis of his religious conviction. That is something that has been visited upon our own shores.

Ms Rimmer: I hope that the Minister will discuss with his Pakistani counterparts what can be done to support this beleaguered population, especially given that the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religious belief, Lord Ahmad, is an Ahmadi himself. If we fail to stand up for the freedom of religious belief of Ahmadis in Pakistan, we place ourselves in the rather ridiculous position of failing to stand up for the freedom of religious belief of our own special envoy for freedom of religious belief! It is urgent that we deal with that.

One thing that could really help, and which I urge the Minister to push for, is the implementation of the 2014 Pakistan Supreme Court judgment, which ordered the Government to, among other things, establish a national council for minority rights. This body has yet to be established, but if it were set up and the judgment implemented fully, it could have a significant impact on the welfare of Pakistani religious or belief minorities.

The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned that religious minorities in Pakistan do not have sufficient skills to obtain more valuable employment. The chairman of the Public Service Commission in Pakistan suggested an interesting idea to our delegation to address that problem. He mentioned the possibility of gathering all those who had just fallen short of the qualifications needed for a particular job, and training them to get them to the required standard, so that they would be ready when the next job came around that is put aside for these people. He specifically mentioned nursing as an area where such a program could be especially effective, and that he would appreciate support from the UK. Similarly, the Punjabi Ministry for human rights specifically asked our delegation to suggest that the UK earmark aid funding to help religious minority groups to overcome the significant barriers they face in Pakistan, which, believe me, are quite shocking. Will the Minister consider those ideas?

Before I finish I want to talk about refugees from Myanmar. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recently declared that Chin State in Myanmar is stable and secure from a refugee perspective, and that it would begin to return Chin refugees from India and Malaysia. The Chin Human Rights Organisation has, however, produced a report detailing how systematic violations of freedom of religious belief, including killings, torture and other forms of cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment, are still prevalent. Is the Minister willing to ask the UNHCR to share the information on which it based the conclusion that Chin State is stable and secure?

I thank the Government for their work on freedom of religious belief and for graciously meeting and supporting our delegation in Pakistan. I hope the Minister will do all he can to investigate and evaluate claims of forced organ harvesting in China, including pushing for an independent international tribunal on the issue. I trust that he will also work with his Pakistani counterparts to push for implementation of the recommendations made by the hon. Member for Strangford, and to support religious minorities in Pakistan, such as the Ahmadis, by calling for the establishment of a national council for minority rights. Finally, I am sure that refugees from Chin State, Myanmar would be immensely grateful if the Minister asked the UNHCR for the evidence showing that the state is stable and secure.

2.23 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer). I associate myself with her comments.

It is always a pleasure to speak in a debate secured by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a doughty champion of the rights of people to express their religious belief and to find and approach God in their own way. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) noted, this debate is not about the freedom to express the belief that I share with someone, but the freedom to express the belief that one has. The hon. Member for Strangford always makes the point that it is also about the freedom to express the belief in no religious faith, to not believe in God, to be an atheist, and to not be compelled to believe in something. For me, that is the core of this debate.

I am pleased to say that my church is quite active in the work of Open Doors. We publish the world watch list there each year, which brings home to those coming through the doors of St Matthias in Torquay—a Victorian church that has stood for about 150 years—that there are still many countries around the world where a church cannot stand so openly and its worshippers cannot just walk in. For many people, that simple act of wanting to go to church on a Sunday and praise their Lord could lead to them being sacked from their job, imprisoned, persecuted and, in some cases, killed. The chance to reflect on that in this Chamber is always welcome.

It is appropriate for me to reflect on this issue, which was recently brought home to me when I met two missionaries in my constituency who work in a part of the world where there is significant state repression. I have been asked not to give any more details than that. They told me about their experience of working in those areas—taking the faith out in a place where the Government do not have a particular view about the Christian faith as such, but believe that one's faith should be in the Government itself, and where they want to crack down on any sign that people have their own thought processes or think for themselves.

In all too many cases, cracking down on people's freedom of religion goes hand in glove with cracking down on every other right that they have. The countries that are likely to abuse religious rights and freedom of belief are exactly the same countries that crack down on journalists who write unhelpful articles or people who just believe that they should have a different say—for example, by being able to vote freely.

Every year we reflect, sadly, on the fact that North Korea tops Open Doors' world watch list for persecution of Christians—being candid, it would top the list for the persecution by the state of any religious faith, except that which says that the leader of that country is some sort of divine being. While the North Korean regime may wish to celebrate its 70th year, there is nothing for its people to celebrate about the existence of that state for the last 70 years. The country is clearly in a desperate state and many people are starving.

Even among all that, there are still an estimated 200,000 to 400,000 Christians in the country. Even with everything they see around them, they hold on to that shining faith, which many of us share. However, it is estimated that between 50,000 and 70,000 people—the

margins have to be wide, because it is incredibly hard to get accurate statistics or conduct work to establish what is going on in that country—might be in labour camps, in appalling conditions reminiscent of many of the concentration camps we saw in Europe back in the 1940s, when another tyrannical regime sought to put itself in the place of God.

While that may sound depressing, it is also quite inspiring for Christians in the west when we hear the story, for example, on the Open Doors website of Hea Woo, who planted a church in a North Korean labour camp—literally planted a church there for fellow Christians to come together in the name of God. While they were meeting in a toilet in a North Korean labour camp, rather than one of the great abbeys, such as the one we have opposite this place, or the churches that many of us frequent at home, there is still a church, and God and the Holy Spirit would have been there with them when they came together in Christ's name. It is an inspiring picture that shows how the power of faith breaks through. Even in the worst, most horrible and appalling conditions, people still see the Christian faith as their source of light and inspiration. The story talks about still thanking God for the grace that they receive. For me, that is what was so inspiring about what it means to those people.

When I have come to these debates in previous years, we have inevitably ended up looking towards the middle east and the appalling behaviour of Daesh, which saw Christian communities that had existed for thousands of years and are named in the Bible wiped out in a few weeks. Thankfully, that group is being pushed back and is in retreat, but that should not hide the fact that appalling repression continues. In some cases, the people who are seeking to liberate areas from Daesh still hold the view that only one faith can be tolerated in their communities.

The issues in Turkey have already been touched on. Many of us were hopeful when we started to see signs of a new regime in Saudi Arabia, which removed the ridiculous ban on women driving and started to make noises about letting them in cinemas. The last couple of weeks and what happened in that country's Turkish consulate will perhaps have given people pause for thought, however, about where it is going. No matter what trade or other interests we have, we should not be afraid to challenge certain countries. All Christians want to do is to proclaim God and to proclaim their faith. They do not want to force someone else to share their faith; they just want to freely share theirs, as people can in this country.

We should look not just at the middle east, but at sub-Saharan Africa and at the situation in Nigeria in particular. Nigeria is a melting pot of many cultures and faiths. It has the opportunity and the resources to be a wonderful place that provides a high standard of living for its people, but all too often those resources are caught up in conflict or destroyed, particularly by Boko Haram's actions in the north. That group has sought not only to suppress people's religious freedoms, but to take away rights to education. It particularly does not want women and girls to be educated and it enforces those views and beliefs.

It will be interesting to hear the Minister's thoughts, but the next place where we may need to think carefully about how we continue to promote peace, stability and security, and how we ensure that some of those basic

rights are guaranteed, might be in areas where the problem is not the state, but corrupt local forces on the ground or a non-state actor looking to impose its own regime and beliefs. We will need to think about how we continue to respond to that growing threat, particularly in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, as the focus of certain extremist groups moves away from the middle east, from Syria and Iraq, to that troubled part of the world. We have seen the situation in Libya, where not only can faith not be freely practised, but where there has been a return of the type of scenes involving slavery that we hoped had disappeared in Wilberforce's era, but which are sadly being revealed in our 21st-century world.

It is likely that we will be here again next year, and hopefully we will be able to reflect on some progress. It is easy to get quite depressed sometimes about where certain parts of the world are going, but it is worth remembering that religious repression was common 30 years ago across swathes of eastern Europe, including in parts of what is now the Federal Republic of Germany. Whole generations of people in Europe had to live under oppression.

I heard the points that my hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Stafford made about the European convention on human rights, but there is a debate to be had about how it can become a more effective thing to be signed, because there can be very few people living in eastern Ukraine who feel that their rights are being well protected by having Russia as a signatory to that accord.

Mark Field: On one of my hon. Friend's previous points, it is worth putting on the record that, although we would like to do more and achieve more, by raising the issue in this and other European Parliaments, we can shine a light on parts of the world where in the past that might not have happened. Although we can all become rather depressed about how much more work has to be done in this area, we can make a real impact through these sorts of debates, bringing parts of the world, and hence the rights of many millions that could otherwise be ignored, to the forefront of many people's minds here and in other democracies. We should celebrate that, while recognising that there is much more to be done.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for his intervention. He is absolutely right that such debates shine a light and give hope to people who may not be able to express their faith freely. They show that in parts of the world where people can do that, we care, we focus and we will speak up for their right to express their faith. As I said about the case in North Korea, some of the stories, and the fact that people do such things under those conditions, are an inspiration to any of who profess to have faith—in my case, the Christian faith.

It is welcome that we continue to stand up and speak and that we continue to comment and make noise about this issue. People can look at what we are saying and see our thoughts, our values and how we freely and happily associate as people with different religious beliefs. I bet that there are different views and different denominations among hon. Members in this Chamber, which makes us all stronger and more secure in our faith. It is not a threat to someone's faith to be with someone of another faith. Those who are strongest in their faith have nothing

to fear about anyone else's belief. It is those who are weak in their faith who define themselves by what they are against, not what they are for.

Following the Minister's welcome intervention, it would be interesting to hear more from him about what concrete steps the UK can take, diplomatically and economically, perhaps using our development budgets, to promote the freedom of religion or belief and to support countries that are moving away from oppressive regimes or where communities are trying to re-establish themselves, particularly those that may have been driven out by genocidal behaviour. Part of that process is about supporting them to go back to their areas.

What difference does the Minister think the UK will be able to make as a P5 nation in the next couple of years? As he mentioned previously in a statement in the House, it is likely that France, Britain and Germany will be on the Security Council, which are three countries that work closely together on many issues, including securing basic human freedoms.

It is welcome to have this debate again. It is always welcome to be able to stand up and shine a light, to proclaim our faith and to make it clear that we feel that it is important that we can approach God without feeling that that needs to take away anyone else's right to have a faith or not. By standing up and having this debate again, we have given hope and inspiration. If it gives hope to one more person in a dark dank hole in a North Korean labour camp that one day things will change, because people are standing up and speaking about their condition, it is worth every minute we spend here.

2.37 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this incredibly important debate and for his tireless campaign for all those around the world who are persecuted because of their faith.

As the proud chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, my contribution will focus largely on the persecution of the Ahmadis. One of the largest mosques in western Europe is on the border of my constituency. As several hon. Members have said, the community identifies as Muslim but does not believe that Mohammed was the final prophet sent to guide mankind. That belief has led to widespread persecution across the world, and, I am afraid to say, even in the UK, as has been mentioned. I will take hon. Members on a global tour, from Indonesia to Islamabad, Bangkok to Burundi, and describe the day-to-day reality faced by the community.

In Algeria, 280 Ahmadi Muslims have been arrested on the grounds of their faith in the last two years alone. In Burundi, 13 young Ahmadis were arrested earlier this year while attending a religious education class. In Egypt, the Interior Minister started the year by issuing arrest warrants for at least 25 Ahmadis, including the publications secretary for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Ahmadis are the only international religious group denied the right to register as a religious community. In Indonesia, Ahmadiyya Muslim is not even an authorised religion.

[Siobhain McDonagh]

In Pakistan, as we have heard, it is a criminal offence for Ahmadis to call themselves Muslim, name their place of worship a mosque or even say the Islamic greeting. Hundreds of Ahmadis have been murdered in Pakistan. There is a separate electoral register that effectively denies them the right to vote. Even the grave of a Nobel laureate, Professor Abdus Salam, has been desecrated, to remove the word “Muslim”.

Finally, I turn to Thailand, where this month the Government have arrested 113 Ahmadiyya Muslim refugees amid a new crackdown on immigration, putting them at risk of deportation back to Pakistan, despite the fact that those arrested included Ahmadis who have been granted resettlement in Thailand.

Will the Minister take away from today's debate the urgent need to raise the case of those Ahmadiyya Muslims with the Thai Government, and can he establish precisely what measures are being taken to ensure that such global hatred is prevented from reoccurring? I ask that final question because although I have taken Members on a global tour, the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community has now spread to the UK.

It was referred to earlier, but I also give the example of the murder of an Ahmadiyya shopkeeper, Asad Shah, in Glasgow. I could also cite the case of the Waltham Forest communities forum, which actively stopped an Ahmadiyya Muslim from being re-elected, stating that he could not be a representative of Islam. There is an undercurrent of hostility, in the form of posters calling for a boycott of Ahmadiyya businesses. The former national president of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Students Association has even described Ahmadiyya posters being torn down on campuses right across the country.

Such a scourge of extremism is a stain on the freedom of religion that we rightly and proudly celebrate here in the UK. In recent months our all-party parliamentary group has held a five-part inquiry that has heard evidence from around the world and from across the UK. It is the first ever parliamentary inquiry of its kind. The testimonies given were harrowing, conveying the scale of the hatred faced by Ahmadis far more starkly than any facts or figures could indicate. The APPG is compiling the evidence into a report and I will take this opportunity to invite the Minister and all Members here today to its launch, which we expect to take place at the beginning of the new year.

We cannot let such widespread persecution go unchallenged. As an MP, I have a duty to stand up to it on behalf of my constituents; as a Chamber, we have a duty to eradicate it from our country; and as a country, the Government have a duty to challenge it globally, wherever and whenever it is allowed to flourish.

2.42 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate to mark this year's International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing it, for his work on this issue and for the tour de force that was his speech. I will also say how much I respect every speech that has been made in the Chamber today; I agree with everything that has been said.

Let me start with some positive news. Earlier this week, Members may have heard news of a 13-year-old boy in Pakistan called Sharjeel, who was the only Christian in his class, all the other pupils being Muslim. Last week he turned off a water tap at school, for which he was beaten and expelled, on the grounds that he had polluted the water supply. Colleagues may recall the case of Asia Bibi, the wife and mother who is still in detention, some nine years on, for drinking water from a communal tap, for which she was accused of polluting the water supply.

Sharjeel's mother went to the school to object to his treatment. She was told that he was an infidel who was only fit for cleaning latrines. How, therefore, can I say that I have some positive news? Following the concerns raised in the past few days by religious freedom activists, in Pakistan and abroad, with the authorities in Pakistan, there has been a swift response, which is very different from what happened in Asia Bibi's case, which I hope will help that lady. In Sharjeel's case, direct action has been taken by the Human Rights Minister in Pakistan, Dr Shireen Mazari—the head of the school has been suspended and an inquiry has been launched by the district education office.

That shows that when we raise individual cases of concern, we can make a difference. Of course, we need to do more. I therefore ask the Minister to keep a watchful eye on Sharjeel's case and to raise it as soon as he can with his counterparts in Pakistan. At the same time, may I also draw his attention to the fact that around half a billion pounds of UK aid is spent every year in Pakistan? However, there is little evidence that the aid money is being used either to prioritise freedom of religion or belief in that country or to help persecuted minorities. In Pakistan, 5% of minorities should be given proper jobs but, due to a lack of education, many members of minority groups do not qualify.

I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Strangford and for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) for the work they have done, because they have not just been talking about the issue, as I am today; they actually went to Pakistan and brought back their concerns, as did Lord Alton, who has told me about the camps that many of these people are living in, because they could not support themselves. The camps lack even the most basic facilities—no running water, electricity or latrines. However, I understand from Lord Alton that no DFID staff member has ever visited the camps. May I ask the Minister to rectify that omission, in a country that receives so much UK aid?

Jeremy Lefroy: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend, who does a huge amount of work in this area, for mentioning development. Does she agree that development without freedom of religion or belief is development that will not achieve its ends?

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend puts it so well. He and I have seen that that is the case in many countries we have visited with the International Development Committee.

One of those countries is Nepal, where we met Christians who were greatly concerned—I am going back now three or four years—about restrictions on their freedom in that country. I thank the Minister, because I know that he has taken very seriously the concerns that we have expressed many times about such restrictions in

Nepal. Actually, they are now far worse than they were even when we visited the country a few years ago. He knows much about the situation in Nepal, so I ask him once again to urge the Government of Nepal to repeal or amend sections 155 to 159 of the country's new penal code. That code, which came into force just in August, severely restricts freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. I have met people from Nepal who are now seriously concerned about being imprisoned as a result of speaking about their own faith in their own homes. That cannot be right.

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

I also ask the Minister to call on the Government of Nepal to amend its constitution. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) mentioned constitutions being used to restrict freedom of belief. Again, the Government of Nepal have put in place elements of the constitution that are deeply concerning. Specifically, I ask the Minister to press the Government of Nepal to remove from the constitution any reference to restrictions on conversion, bringing it into line with the country's obligations under article 18 of the international covenant on civil and political rights.

I will turn briefly to another matter: the persecution of Falun Gong in China. I commend the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston on her superb speech. She said so much to express the horror and incredulity that many of us felt when we heard about forced organ harvesting. It is almost beyond belief to hear reports that a Government are incarcerating people because of their beliefs, taking their blood and DNA samples, and then—this would appear to be the case, which is why the Minister must look into it—there is a request, almost to order, for an organ for transplant. If that is correct, it is horrendous. Of course, when the organs are removed, the victims die.

I thank the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston for mentioning the report on that issue that the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission produced over two years ago. I do not like to go away from these events without presenting the Minister with something, so I handily have a copy of the report, which I will pass to him if he has not seen it. I ask that he acts on all the requests made by the hon. Lady. I ask that he raises the issue with the Chinese delegation at the next human rights dialogue with China, and asks why the practice appears to be continuing, despite the Chinese authorities' announcement of a full transition to voluntary donations as long ago as 2015. If that is the case, let the Chinese authorities say so, because at the moment they are not confirming that.

I will now turn to a country that so far has not been mentioned: Russia. I will take this opportunity to pass to the Minister the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission's latest report, launched just this Tuesday—it is on our website, conservativehumanrights.com—on human rights in Russia today. Time prohibits me from going into detail, but I hope he will read the report, particularly the several sections that are pertinent to today's debate. Those sections deal with restrictions on freedom of expression, the press, assembly, association, and religion or belief. It is concerning to note how many religious groups other than the Russian Orthodox Church now face increasing restrictions in Russia.

The commission received detailed submissions from the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses regarding the recent treatment of its members in Russia. In April, the Russian Supreme Court banned the Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist" organisation. Those who continue to practise their faith—of whom there are 170,000—risk being prosecuted and jailed for up to 10 years. That is not just theory; it is happening. Evidence of widespread, specific cases of arrest, search, and seizure for interrogation and detention of Jehovah's Witnesses is detailed in the report. I would be grateful if the Minister could raise those concerns with his Russian counterparts, or ask his colleagues to do so, when the opportunity arises. I hope that will be soon, because the report contains the names of over 100 individual prisoners who are currently in detention, specifically in connection with their rights to freedom of religion or belief. We ask the Minister to ensure that those names are drawn to the attention of the Russian authorities. They have come to our commission from the Memorial human rights centre.

Jeremy Lefroy: It is great to see you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. Russia has given so much to faith—to the Christian faith through the Orthodox faith, but also other faiths in other parts of Russia—and has benefited so much from faith. We recall Dostoyevsky, who was converted to Christianity through his experience in a labour camp under the Tsars. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is sad to see a country that has gained so much from faith behaving in this way?

Fiona Bruce: I agree wholeheartedly. I was saddened and deeply concerned by the stories we heard at first hand of intimidation, harassment, imprisonment—often including cruel treatment in prison—and repression of people in Russia because of their beliefs.

Jim Shannon: In my introduction, I referred briefly to eastern Ukraine, which Russia has annexed and taken over. Some Baptist pastors went missing in that area and are entirely unaccounted for. Churches have been destroyed and people have been restricted from being able to worship their God. Russia has control there.

Fiona Bruce: Yes. There are many other aspects of the report that time precludes me from going into, but there are indeed many geographical areas where persecution is taking place.

I would be grateful if the Minister agreed to meet my co-commissioners and me to discuss our report. We received some evidence in person from some important witnesses, including Marina Litvinenko—her husband, as Members will remember, was assassinated in London over a decade ago—and Bill Browder, whose lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, died in prison in Russia, as a result of which Mr Browder has campaigned internationally for justice and human rights in Russia. We also received evidence via Skype from Garry Kasparov, the world chess champion, who was driven into exile because he could not freely live his life according to his beliefs in Russia.

I will now turn to Nigeria—I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) wants to speak about that country, so I will shorten my comments a little. A serious issue is occurring in Nigeria. I will

[Fiona Bruce]

refer first to my letter of 9 October to the Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), regarding the case of Leah Sharibu, one of 110 girls abducted by Boko Haram from their school in Dapchi. The other girls were all released some six months ago following negotiations, but Leah—the only Christian among them—remains in captivity because she refuses to convert in exchange for her freedom. She has now spent more than 200 days in captivity. Will the Minister speak with his ministerial counterpart, and perhaps respond to my question in that letter about what steps the UK Government can take to assist the Nigerian authorities in ensuring Leah's swift and safe return?

I draw the Minister's attention to concerns that nothing less than genocide is unfolding in Nigeria, with inadequate international attention paid to it. In recent years there has been an escalation in attacks on communities in several states by well-armed Fulani herdsmen. Local observers describe those attacks as a campaign of ethno-religious cleansing. Reports from Christian Solidarity Worldwide—an organisation whose work globally, and in this case in Nigeria, I also pay tribute to—say that

“the local chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) recently revealed that herders have destroyed over 500 churches in Benue state alone since 2011.”

When I visited Nigeria over two years ago with the International Development Committee, my colleagues and I attended a roundtable of civil society representatives. One of those representatives was a senior member of the Christian Association of Nigeria, who highlighted concerns about the issue, saying that ethno-religious cleansing was happening. Sadly, insufficient notice of his concerns was taken by DFID representatives in Nigeria at the time. Two years later, the matter has significantly worsened. I implore the Minister to look into the situation. It has been exacerbated by inadequate Nigerian Government action, which CSW says has “entrenched impunity”.

The people being persecuted by those herdsmen need Government support, as the herdsmen are so brutal that individual communities are defenceless against them. Only yesterday evening, at a meeting of Nigerians, I spoke with someone who had lived in Nigeria until very recently. He told me that those herder militias are so brutal that even Boko Haram leaves them alone. They are armed with sophisticated weaponry, including AK47s, in some cases chemicals, and even rocket launchers. Those militias are believed to have murdered more people in 2015, 2016 and 2017 than Boko Haram, destroying, overrunning and seizing property and land, and displacing tens of thousands. It is not sufficient to say that they are simply traveller communities involved in farmer-herder clashes, attacking indiscriminately. That is what I heard when I was there.

Attacks on Christian communities by these herdsmen are becoming far too common. CSW reports that in the first quarter of 2018 they have perpetrated more than 100 attacks on communities in central Nigeria, claiming more than 1,000 lives. To give one example, in August a Nigerian pastor, Adamu Wurim Gyang, his three children and his wife were burnt alive when their house was set on fire in Abonong village. A clergyman, Ezekiel Dachomo, appealed in a video in September for assistance from the US, UK parliamentarians and the UN, saying:

“Please stand for us. We are dying...please allow us to survive. We have nobody. Only God in heaven can stand for us. Please, I am begging you. United Nations, your silence is getting worse...Please, please, I'm begging you stand for the helpless.”

The international community must hear these cries. Those of us who remember the barbaric genocide in Rwanda are reflecting now that history could be repeating itself. Will the Minister work with the UN to urge the Nigerian Government to develop effective solutions to bring an end to this atrocious violence?

Before I turn to my final country, I urge colleagues, in addition to commemorating International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day today, to support Red Wednesday on 28 November. I ask them to join calls for the Speaker to permit the buildings of Parliament—the Commons and the Lords—to be lit up red to highlight the concerns we have about these freedoms. I also ask them to urge local public buildings in their communities to do the same. A third day that I would like to draw colleagues' attention to is specifically about victims of genocide. I tabled an early-day motion in July asking for support for an international day commemorating victims and survivors of religious persecution. If colleagues would be good enough to sign that EDM, we can perhaps bring the need to have a particular focus on victims and survivors much more into the international arena than we have to date.

I will move on to my final country, which is, as it was when we were last in this Chamber debating this issue, the UK. I rejoice that here in the UK we enjoy a significant heritage of prizing and protecting freedom of expression, freedom of thought, freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. We do not suffer persecution of the type we have heard about in many countries. However, I have become increasingly concerned in recent years about whether these freedoms are being adequately protected in practice in our country.

I welcome the recent Supreme Court judgment regarding Ashers Baking Company, where the Court ruled that the owners should not be compelled to promote a message that clashes with their own sincerely held biblical beliefs. The ruling has implications not simply for Christians or for religious people; it is an important safeguard for us all, because it upholds an important principle of freedom of expression—namely, that no one should be compelled to express a belief that they do not hold, still less a message with which they strongly disagree.

None the less, I want to sound two notes of caution in closing. First, although I am pleased by the Supreme Court judgment, I am concerned that the case progressed to anything like the extent it did through our courts. I am all the more concerned because its progress was reportedly funded at enormous public expense—to the tune of around a quarter of a million pounds—by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, and that is not to mention the fees of the McArthur family. Should the issue not have been sensibly resolved more quickly, and certainly without the trauma that the brave McArthur family must have endured to make the public stand they did? I pay tribute to them, as I do to the Christian Institute, which supported them. Why did a public body support the action? Why did the courts not uphold this important freedom much earlier in the process? As one part of the solution, I suggest that we need to see a redoubling of efforts to promote religious literacy in the judicial system.

Secondly, while underlining my welcome of the recent judgment and the vindication of the McArthur family, it is important to recognise that that does not negate the challenges faced by many other Christians in the UK on account of their Christian faith. I hope that the judgment is a turning point in securing a better, practical settlement in the protection in everyday life of religious freedom generally, not only for Christians, but for those with other beliefs. I hope that the judgment will encourage those who have sincere beliefs to speak out about them and not to feel that they are subject to what has been called “the chilling effect”, inhibiting them from doing so. I hope that we will see further evidence in coming months that judicially, politically and culturally our commitment to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as to freedom of expression, is deep and real here in the UK, even where that freedom may be politically or culturally inconvenient. In terms of religious freedom, we should stand as an exemplar beacon of hope to others who suffer far more gravely around the world.

3.6 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a great pleasure to participate in this debate and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. Equally, it is an enormous honour for me to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who in so many ways stands as a beacon for all of us, particularly those of us who recently became Members, who share her deep convictions and principles. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—he is my friend—on securing this debate. He is another shining beacon, an example and a city set on a hill in this regard and many others.

With this debate, we are talking about something that is fundamental to civilisation: freedom of religion or belief. It is a fundamental freedom. It is in so many ways the foundation freedom. I feel passionately about the subject because I am a member of a religious minority—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—that has a long history of persecution and misrepresentation. Happily, those dark days are largely behind us, but the lessons learned are deeply ingrained and any suggestion of intolerance or persecution of any minority religious group or minority group of any kind is anathema to me, as I am sure it is to other hon. and right hon. Members.

The first President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith, declared the human right to exercise

“that free independence of mind which heaven has so graciously bestowed upon the human family is one of its choicest gifts”.

On another occasion, he said:

“Meddle not with any man for his religion: all governments ought to permit every man to enjoy his religion unmolested. No man is authorised to take away life in consequence of difference of religion, which all laws and governments ought to tolerate and protect, right or wrong.”

Freedom of religion or belief is a foundation human right as described in the universal declaration on human rights, which this coming December will be 70 years old. Article 18 reads:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

It is my sincere belief that it is a fundamental responsibility of Government to frame such laws as are necessary to secure for each individual citizen the free exercise of conscience and to hold these laws inviolate. To violate that right is to suppress the freedom of the human soul, and no Government can long exist in peace, nor can any society prosper, while citizens are denied such fundamental freedoms.

Earlier this year, the Pew Research Centre published its ninth annual study of global restrictions on religion. It is a comprehensive examination of freedom of religion or belief in 198 countries, and it showed that for the second year in a row there has been an increase in the overall level of restrictions imposed on freedom of religion or belief by Governments. The report states that the share of countries with high or very high levels of Government restrictions—that is, laws, policies and actions by officials that restrict religious beliefs and practices—rose from 25% to 28%. That is the highest percentage of high or very high levels of Government restrictions since 2013, and falls just below the 10-year peak of 29% in 2012.

Open Doors summarises the global trends of people being persecuted for their Christian faith. More than 200 million believers in 50 countries have experienced high levels of persecution because of their faith, and more than 3,000 Christians have been killed for their faith in the reporting period for 2018—more than twice as many in any previous reporting period. Each of Open Doors’ top 11 world watch list countries are now classified as places of extreme persecution—more countries than ever before in the 26 years of the world watch list.

Open Doors’ report highlights the deteriorating situations in Libya, Eritrea, India and Egypt. Countries where there is extreme persecution are North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Pakistan, Eritrea, Libya, Iraq and Yemen, many of which have been mentioned. For the 17th consecutive year, North Korea has been named the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian, and sadly the situation in Afghanistan and Somalia is in many ways just as critical.

Sam Brownback, the recently appointed US ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, has singled out the situation in China, which he describes as worsening for people of faith. The situation in China has been well documented, especially in the last few days, as reports of large-scale camps—euphemistically described as re-education centres or schools—have reached the west. As many as 1 million Muslims have been locked up in such camps without trial. In western China, the Uyghurs number some 12 million souls. They are Muslim people who live with the constant threat of arrest and censure by the Communist authorities. BBC journalist John Sudworth, whom I commend for his recent reports, states:

“Harsh new legal penalties have been introduced to curtail Islamic identity and practice—banning, among other things, long beards and headscarves, the religious instruction of children, and even Islamic-sounding names.”

Christian churches have long been the object of official Chinese attention. To register as a state-sanctioned Christian organisation, religious leaders must receive training to adapt doctrine to Government and Communist party thinking. Recent repression efforts target both house and state-sanctioned churches through the harassment and detention of Christian believers, blocking entry to

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sites of worship, interrupting gatherings, dismantling crosses, demolishing churches and disbanding congregations. Recently, the Chinese authorities have begun to insist on the installation of monitoring equipment in churches in Beijing.

Last month's provisional deal between the Vatican and the Chinese Government is regarded as a key moment in decades of struggle over the Catholic Church's right to appoint bishops in China. Pope Francis recently recognised the legitimacy of seven bishops approved and appointed by the Chinese Government. Yet a fundamental characteristic of freedom of religion is the right to Church autonomy to determine its own theology and doctrine, to establish membership standards and to own and manage sacred properties, and the right of its members to associate freely without unwarranted governmental or other official interference.

The position of Falun Gong practitioners, which has been mentioned, and Tibetan Muslims is also well documented, with both subjected to some of the worst extremes of Chinese oppression. Our view of China must be tempered by what we know about those fundamental abuses of human rights, and when we embrace China or seem to celebrate its contribution to the world, we must never forget or leave behind the many millions of people of faith who are persecuted and prosecuted by the Chinese authorities. What representations have been made recently by Her Majesty's Government to China about the treatment of religious minorities?

Jeremy Lefroy: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does he agree that one of the questions to ask the Chinese Government is, "Why are you afraid of people of faith? They contribute so much to society. They're not trying to undermine you. They may have a slightly different view on certain things. As Communists, you may proclaim atheism, although I suspect that quite a number of members of the Communist party do have a faith. What are you afraid of? You will benefit greatly from allowing people to fulfil their potential as sons and daughters of God."

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and associate myself entirely with the sentiment that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) expressed. There is nothing to fear when one has faith, well founded, and any system that fears people of faith is a system that is in deep trouble. Such is the nature of tyranny and oppressive regimes everywhere.

The Christian and Yazidi minorities of northern Iraq were decimated by Daesh in 2014. Iraq's Christian community once numbered 1.5 million, but today probably fewer than 200,000 Christians remain. Mark Green, the administrator of the United States Agency for International Development, recently described the region in *The Washington Post* as

"a land of pain...It's very clear what the Yazidi have gone through is as disturbing as I can describe, and is ongoing. They have families that have been broken up and disappeared, as well as murder, rape and torture."

I pay tribute to the recently announced Nobel peace prize winners, the Congolese doctor Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad, a Yazidi woman, for their efforts to

end the use of sexual violence in conflict. Ms Murad is 25 years old. I have a son of a similar age. *The Wall Street Journal*, when reporting the award of the Nobel peace prize, wrote:

"Ms. Murad was among some 6,000 Yazidis who were rounded up by Islamic State militants when they overran northern Iraq in the summer of 2014.

Hundreds of adult men, including six of Ms. Murad's brothers and stepbrothers, were murdered, while women and girls—as young as nine, the U.N. reported—were awarded to fighters who raped and sold them in slave markets. Ms. Murad escaped after three months and became one of the first Yazidi women to speak out about the horrors".

Ms Murad wrote in August:

"We, and the Yazidi community generally, need more than sympathy."

What is being done by Her Majesty's Government to offer aid, protection and security to the Christian and Yazidi communities in northern Iraq?

Jeremy Lefroy: Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the work of the co-recipient of the Nobel peace prize, Denis Mukwege, who has also stood up bravely on behalf of particularly the women of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the face of the terrible civil strife that they have endured. Both those people exhibited enormous bravery and stood up for their beliefs.

Stephen Kerr: I, once again, thank my hon. Friend. I think I might have mispronounced the gentleman's name when I mentioned him, for which I apologise, but I absolutely associate myself with what my hon. Friend has said.

To return to the case that has to be made and remade for the primacy of freedom of religion or belief, earlier this year the all-party group for freedom of religion or belief, under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Strangford, welcomed Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Dr Daniel Mark, chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, to Parliament. I want to reflect on some of the remarks that Elder Christofferson made on that occasion because they are highly pertinent. He said that freedom of religion benefits not only believers but all of society, whether they know it or not. He tied religious freedom to the freedoms of worship, association, expression and opinion, and assembly, and from arbitrary arrest and detention, and interference in home and family, saying that all rights and liberties are mutually supportive, with freedom of religion as what he called,

"the root freedom in giving life to all others... Religious freedom protects the freedom of individual belief and expression in all areas of human activity. This enables people to develop and express their own opinions in matters of philosophy, politics, business, literature, art, science, and other areas, which naturally leads to social and political diversity."

Elder Christofferson went on to say that freedom of religion connects to the rights of free speech, free expression, freedom of the press, and freedom peaceably to assemble, and that those basic freedoms tend to rise and fall together.

As I conclude, may I ask the Minister to consider the following questions? How will the Government respond to the commitments made at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in relation to freedom of religion

or belief? How will such matters be followed up? In Washington in July, an event was sponsored by the US Administration at which there was something called the Potomac declaration and the Potomac plan of action, part of the first ever US-sponsored Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. How can we ensure that such gatherings are not just more talk? How can we ensure that they are more than talk? Are we prepared to do more to stress the link between international development and adherence to article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights and perhaps even the Potomac declaration? Is Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon's July appointment as the Prime Minister's special envoy on freedom of religion or belief intended to be seen as an answer to what the United States calls an ambassador-at-large for freedom of religion or belief? What exactly is the extent of the remit that the noble Lord Ahmad now has?

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Another pertinent question would be: what resources has Lord Ahmad been given to carry out that specific function?

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful for that additional question on the role that the noble Lord has been given, which we all welcome and had long sought.

May I thank you, Mr McCabe, for the opportunity to participate in this important debate? I pay tribute to all my colleagues who have spoken or will speak in this debate, which I consider to be one of the most important debates that we hold annually. It allows us the opportunity to restate our collective, individual and national commitment to the principle of freedom of religion or belief—a freedom that I believe this place represents to the whole world.

3.24 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I know that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), whom I warmly congratulate on securing this debate, has a debate coming up on 27 November on the subject of armed violence against farming communities in Nigeria, most of whom are Christian. I will use the situation in Nigeria as an example of how we might approach the issue of religious freedom. Although this does not fall under my remit as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Nigeria, I do know the country and feel that I can comment in that context.

The federal and state Governments in Nigeria are prevented from adopting a state religion or discriminating in any way on religious grounds. The split between Christians and Muslims is almost exactly 50/50—there is about a 1% difference between the two. Although some 12 states follow sharia law, they do so for Muslim-to-Muslim relations, and it would be wrong to characterise an area in Nigeria as either Christian or Muslim. For example, although significant numbers of Christians live in the north, which is traditionally thought of as a Muslim area, there is no evidence of sharia courts being used for Christian activities unless they particularly want to raise a concern about a Muslim activity. Sharia law is simply for Muslim-to-Muslim activities.

Both Muslim and Christian groups in Nigeria have complained about the Government's handling of disputes, particularly in the central band across the middle of the country where there are long-standing disputes between

Christian farmers and Muslim herders involving rival claims and complaints that security forces did not intervene when farming villages were attacked by herdsmen. It is interesting to note that when farming villages were attacked by herdsmen, there was uproar in Abuja. The President was summoned to Parliament, as were service chiefs and security advisers, and they were subjected to intense pressure from parliamentarians. Equally, however, the media regularly report claims by Christians that northern leaders, backed by the Government, are trying to Islamise the whole of the country. Of course, the presence of Boko Haram is crucial to that.

Boko Haram is a terrorist organisation. It is not one that the Government can control. Although, with the help of British service personnel who are there as advisers, the Nigerian Government are trying to attack Boko Haram, Boko Haram will not be defeated by military means alone. It will be defeated by the country sharing in the wealth creation that is going on in Nigeria and by making sure it is shared at an individual level, so that people are offered something that Boko Haram cannot offer. There are already signs of success in that.

There have also been reports that Christian groups in northern states are not given building permits—I think that was raised earlier. So we have a situation where Christian communities decide they are simply going to build the churches that they want to and will wait until the Government come and bulldoze them, which they do from time to time. It has happened in various states. However, I also came across an example of a mosque in a similar situation. It was threatened with demolition because it did not have the right planning permit. This issue goes across religions, but we rarely hear about it. Unfortunately, it appears the demolition of the mosque was stopped before it went ahead, and no one quite knows why.

It is worth noting that Muslims, too, complain of a lack of freedom of religion more generally. In one case, a Muslim was denied the chance to be called to the Nigerian Bar simply because she wore a hijab. Christians also complain that it is difficult for them to be admitted into schools, especially to study medicine and engineering, and in many states it is also difficult for them to take courses in Christianity.

There are optimistic signs, however. Some good work is being done by religious leaders on both sides of the argument, including efforts to bring peace to the areas in question. Those were started as a result of the attacks between farmers and herdsmen, particularly after 300 farmers were killed by raiding herdsmen. The violence is related to religious differences, but we should not pretend that all the violence in Nigeria is the result simply of religious differences. Economic and social factors are involved as well.

Fiona Bruce: I absolutely acknowledge what my hon. Friend says. For example, many of the herdsmen, who used to have grazing grounds and could roam fairly freely, now find that the grazing grounds are restricted; but we cannot deny the element of ethnic or religious discrimination in the attacks—in large part, although not in all cases.

John Howell: I was not suggesting that religious differences played no part in the attacks, just that they are not the sole cause. We can legitimately blame a

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number of other factors, including the fact that the media misreport situations widely across Nigeria. We can also blame rapid population growth: the population of Nigeria is about 190 million at the moment, but the World Bank predicts that by 2050—not long hence—it will be 400 million, making it the third most populous country in the world, after India and China. In that situation it is not surprising that tensions arise.

The tensions do have religious aspects. On 15 April 2017, 12 worshippers died and many more were injured in Aso village in Kaduna state, when herdsmen opened fire on an Easter vigil service. Media reports said the attackers boasted about disrupting the Easter celebration, but it not known whether that is true. There are efforts to promote interfaith dialogue, to ensure that feelings on all sides are listened to and that reconciliation is reached.

I intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) with a point about the importance of the European Court of Human Rights and what I might term its parent body, the Council of Europe. The right to hold religious beliefs is protected under article 9 of the European convention on human rights. A wide range of faiths have brought cases to protect their freedom to practise religion. I accept the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) about needing to tighten that up, but it depends on countries being willing to accept the judgments of the Court. Russia has suspended itself from the Council of Europe and can no longer appoint judges, although the population of Russia still has access to the European Court of Human Rights. The Court is hearing a vast number of cases brought by Russian individuals against the Russian state.

That is important for the reason that I raised earlier. The European Court of Human Rights was born out of the conflict of world war two, which had a great deal to do with religion—the Jewish faith and the imprisonment of those of that faith in concentration camps. However, the Council has gone beyond that. We have produced a tremendous number of reports about the need to ensure respect for the religious backgrounds of refugee families coming to Europe—that must of course be mutual, and respect should also come from them. We must not forget the vital role that the Council plays. It may be ignored by many UK Ministers and the UK may be the only country never to send a journalist to monitor its actions, but it still carries out its role and the treaties are signed, by us and others, on a consensual basis. That is an important point to bear in mind.

I again congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford on bringing the debate, and hope my remarks have been helpful in elucidating some of the details.

3.36 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr McCabe. We know that God is shining on us when there is a Scotsman in the Chair in Westminster Hall. I say that as an atheist. I sincerely congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate on an issue that he has championed consistently and with depth. It feels almost rude of me to say these things with my back to him, but I hope that he will take the

words in the spirit in which they are meant. He has always stood up for the right of those of faith, and those of none, to go about their lives in the way they want.

Many Members have given examples illustrating the deeply horrifying and sinister persecution that takes place in countries around the world against different religious minorities. I have no desire to repeat those, but I want to single out one Member who spoke, the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. She has a long-standing interest in their plight and does a good job chairing the group. I am only sorry that I cannot get to more of the meetings.

Many hon. Members will remember the case of Asad Shah, mentioned by the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). He was the Ahmadi shopkeeper from my constituency, on the south side of Glasgow, who was brutally killed. He was loved by everybody; there was not a person with a bad thing to say about him. He was a traditional shopkeeper: the self-service machines in Tesco were not for him; it was for him to fill the basket. People went in as customers and left as friends. He was brutally taken from us because of religious persecution.

I shall never forget that night. The shop where he was killed is about a four-minute walk from my front door. I remember seeing on social media that something had happened. No one quite knew what. I thought, “I am not going to sit up and worry about this. I am going to go to bed.” In the morning, I woke up to the worst possible news: the friendly shopkeeper had been slaughtered on the streets of my constituency. Afterwards, I saw something that I hope never to have to see again. People were rallying outside his shop, which sadly has since had to close because his family have had to leave Glasgow altogether. Hundreds of people had come together to stand in silence and remember a much loved and gentle man. Every time I saw him, he was always friendly. I do not think he ever remembered my name; I was just “Mr SNP” every time I went into his shop. I can assure the House that I have been called worse.

All of us on the south side of Glasgow remember Asad Shah with great affection. We will always be horrified at how he was taken from us and at the motivation behind it. The scenes of solidarity on that Friday night were quite something to see, but I hope I never have to see them again.

I wish the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden the very best in her work to address the plight of the Ahmadi people. As you will know, Mr McCabe, the south side of Glasgow has a substantial Muslim community. There are many Muslim people whom I count as friends and who are fairly progressive even on issues such as gay rights, but I am always amazed that the minute I mention Ahmadi Muslims, something happens—a shutter seems to come down. People keep telling me, “Stewart, it’s best that you don’t bring up the subject in other mosques or with other Muslims. It won’t help you at the next election.” However, it is vital that the hon. Lady and I, along with other hon. Members present, continue to shine a light on it.

Siobhain McDonagh: One of the most shocking things to come out of the inquiry that our all-party group has just undertaken is that there seems to be gloom about

any progress against the persecution of the Ahmadis. The younger generation in Pakistan appears to be more wedded to harassment of Ahmadis than the older generation, so we are in for decades of this. Nor should we assume that all Members of this House share the view that the hon. Gentleman espouses. Discrimination exists among our own ranks.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. I think it was the hon. Member for Stirling who said that we have to continually make the case for religious freedom, just as we do for women's rights, gay rights, ethnic minority rights or any other kind of social progress, because history tells us that someone somewhere will always be waiting to take those rights away.

Let me turn to a subject that has not yet been mentioned. The first debate that I secured as an MP was a debate in this Chamber on human rights in Saudi Arabia. My primary reason for securing it was the case of the jailed Saudi writer Raif Badawi, whom the Saudi Government considered to have committed the crime of apostasy. Here is a man who needs freedom from religion, not freedom of religion. His wife and their three beautiful children now have to live in Canada. He was sentenced to 1,000 lashes and is still in prison, as well as facing a massively unaffordable fine that he will never be able to pay.

I understand that Saudi Arabia is a very tough country and that there are many reformers who have to walk an incredibly fine line—it is never black and white. However, I want to hear more about what the Government are doing about Raif Badawi's case. We hear constantly that it is being held up at the Supreme Court, yet the human rights organisations that I have talked to cannot see any evidence of that.

Saudi Arabia has been brought into sharp focus recently because of events in its consulate in Turkey. I echo what my party's Westminster leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), told the Prime Minister yesterday: the time has come for a fundamental shift in the relationship between this kingdom and that kingdom on the issue of arms sales. This dance with the devil has gone on for too long, and it has to change.

I will bring my remarks to a close soon, because the Minister is the man we are all here to hear from. First, however, I must mention one religious group who have been persecuted more than any other in history: the Jewish people. They have been hunted from every single corner of the world for hundreds of years. It still happens today, even in this country. For the sake of hon. Members who were not present at our debate on antisemitism earlier this year, let me repeat what I said then.

In every city I go to, whether on holiday or on an official visit, I always try to visit the Jewish museum. I love visiting museums in many different cities, but the only museums in which I have to check in my backpack, take off my coat and go through airport-style security are the Jewish museums. It is the same in Paris, Berlin, New York or any other city. Why is that? Why do Jewish schools, even in this country, need security outside them? Why do synagogues around Europe need armed security? Many people think that the persecution of the Jewish people is over, but only a fool would think that.

It is a source of great pride that Scotland is, I think, the only country that has never had an antisemitic law on the statute book. Indeed, the declaration of Arbroath, the oldest medieval text in the world, refers to Jews and Gentiles as equals. That is not to say that everything in Scotland was a picnic; of course it was not. There are positive things in our history, but we should never take them for granted.

I welcome this debate, and I welcome the fact that there is an international day to celebrate freedom of religion or belief. Although I do not have a religion or a religious belief, I will stand with hon. Members who do. We will constantly make the case for people's freedom to worship or not worship, as they see fit. I look forward to the Minister's reply.

3.47 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I would like to start by thanking the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), because I was going to begin my speech by mentioning the case of the Jews, as he and many others have done. I know that hon. Members wish to hear from the Minister, but I ask them to bear with me as I sum up for the Opposition.

I am reminded of a particular case that is close to my heart; I hope hon. Members will forgive me if they have heard it before. It is the case of Raina Sevilla, a Jewish woman who moved from Switzerland to Paris in 1934 in the belief that France was a safe place for Jews to live. Just six years later, after the fall of Paris to the Nazis, she was asked, along with so many other Jews in Paris, to register and wear the yellow star. Some months later, she was picked up in the middle of the night and taken to the Vel' d'Hiv, the velodrome in the middle of Paris. In June or July 1942, along with so many others, she was taken from there to Drancy, the makeshift concentration camp on the north-east outskirts of Paris, near the railhead at Bobigny. The next day she was taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she was sent, along with many thousands of other older women and children, to the gas chambers. She was my great-grandmother. That is why this debate matters, and why it means so very much to all of us.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow South for taking up the case of the Jewish people. I am not a religious man either, but I am Jewish. Every single one of us knows where religious intolerance can end, because we have seen it. History teaches it to us. Every single Member this afternoon has given a brilliant speech telling us why this debate, timed to coincide with the International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, is so appropriate, so important and so essential to the very essence of our existence as a Parliament in this free country of ours.

I pay tribute to my good friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I hope that he does not mind me calling him my good friend. We have worked closely together over many years. He gave his thanks to the Government for their support and for the good work done, and for what is still to be done. I know that we will hear from the Minister shortly about how that will be developed. All Governments in this country, of every party, have supported the right that we value so greatly.

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

The hon. Gentleman talked about forced organ harvesting in China, as others have done this afternoon, and the Falun Gong, a religious minority in China who are being persecuted in astonishingly horrific ways. There are many parallels with what the Jews have suffered, especially during the second world war. He mentioned Chinese Muslims, who have been in the news recently. I have had emails, as I am sure have many other Members, from constituents who are angry and upset at what they hear in the media. It is good that our free media is able to report that, but it is tragic what they have to report and that this is still going on.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the abductions in Punjab and the Rohingya people in Myanmar, as did other Members. He made some positive suggestions, which I know the Minister will examine in his summing up. He talked about an area that is a concern to me as shadow Minister for the middle east and north Africa—Egypt and the torture, disappearances and executions of Christians. He mentioned his comprehensive five-point plan to help stop religious persecution abroad. I will be interested to hear the Minister's response.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) is one of my very favourite colleagues; we worked together on the International Development Committee for three years. In his excellent speech, he talked about the importance of freedom of religious belief, but he also said it was vital to stand up for all those abroad who suffer from persecution—that faith communities themselves must stand up against persecution not of their own faith but of other faiths in other countries. That is an essential point for all of us to remember. He talked about the role of the Court of Human Rights, which is fundamental to who we are as a country. I totally agree with that sentiment, and so does my party. Social media is a great invention, but the abuse and misuse of it has to be stopped in some way. I hope that we, not as legislators but as individuals, might have the power to do that.

My colleague and hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) spoke about her recent trip to Pakistan and the warm reception she received. I have experienced that myself on visits to Pakistan. She mentioned the persecution of the Falun Gong in China, many of whom I have met over the years. Sadly she is now also familiar with the plight they endure day in, day out. She mentioned the 2016 report on transplant programmes in China, and we thank her for the detail she gave—the 60,000 to 100,000 organ transplants per year. Where are those organs coming from? I am afraid the conclusion that we have to draw is the organ harvesting that is so widely documented and evidenced now. It is the tip of an iceberg, as she said. She told us more about Pakistan and the ongoing persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims, and I will come to that in a minute.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) made an excellent speech. He said that the right to believe in “your own faith, which is not necessarily my faith” is a fundamental one, and that he welcomed this debate each year. He spoke of how cracking down on religious belief always leads to cracking down on every other freedom. He referred also to North Korea and the shocking abuses there. It is the most repressive country in the world and is completely opposed to any freedom

of religion, except the one religion that matters—the ability to worship the leader. There are still, in spite of all that, so many Christians still alive and active, and it is a tribute to human nature and the extraordinary conviction of people of faith and of no faith that those Christians, alone and abused and banned from practising their faith, can practice it in the holes in the grounds or the toilets, or wherever it may be in those forced labour camps. Let us hope that we see an end to those, sooner rather than later.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). I pay tribute to the work she has done, year in year out, to draw attention to the plight of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in this and other countries around the world. She detailed the worldwide persecution of that community in her tour d'horizon of all the countries in the world where they are persecuted for their faith. She mentioned the tragic murder of the shopkeeper Asad Shah in Glasgow, as did the hon. Member for Glasgow South, who knew that gentleman. It was absolutely shocking. Listening to my hon. Friend, I was reminded of what the Nazis did to the Jews in Germany. The way they are being treated is so very similar. We have to stand up for them and that is up to all of us. My hon. Friend mentioned the scourge of extremism being a stain on our reputation in our country, a country renowned throughout the world for its religious tolerance. It is our duty as Members of Parliament to stand up against it.

I give huge praise to my friend, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). We also served together on the International Development Committee for three years. As well as enjoying our time together, I learned a lot from her. We travelled across many countries where we saw the excellent work of the Department for International Development. She took us around the world in great detail. I will not reiterate that detail, because we want to hear from the Minister. She mentioned shocking cases in Pakistan, including that of Sharjeel and the positive response to the international condemnation, which means that this House can do something to draw attention to such horrors and persecution.

The hon. Lady also talked—this is very relevant—of the £500 million of taxpayers' money that this country spends on aid in Pakistan, none of which is spent on promoting religious tolerance and education. She also mentioned Nepal—I have visited that country many times—and its new penal code. Let us hope that it sees sense and responds to international pressure to rescind that article of the penal code and to change its constitution. I will be interested to hear the Minister's comments on that.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Falun Gong. She also talked about Russia, which we have not debated very much so far this afternoon, and the report of the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission. It is an excellent organisation—here is a Labour shadow spokesperson talking about a Conservative body, but any organisation or political body that draws attention to this kind of persecution should be praised by all of us, and I praise the hon. Lady for that work. She talked about what Boko Haram is doing in Nigeria, and the kidnapped girls. I thank her for reminding us that there is one child left—the one Christian girl. We need to campaign for her release too.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) spoke of freedom of religion as a fundamental human right and noted that, for the seventh year in a row, we have seen an increase in governmental restrictions on religious freedom. He talked about Afghanistan and Somalia, which we have not heard very much about.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) has always contributed to these debates and has always had much to say in his area of expertise, which is Nigeria. We all benefit from that and I am grateful to learn more about Nigeria, especially as we know about the 50:50 split between Muslims and Christians. Generally, in spite of all the turmoil, including the vastly increasing population and the problems they face, there is actually a lot of good work going on in Nigeria. It is important that we remember that many nations that face problems of religious tolerance and freedom are doing their very best against such a backdrop.

The hon. Member for Henley used one word that is important throughout this whole debate: respect. It is a word that we do not hear too often these days. We need to show more respect, not just for one another in this place, but for those who have a different way of life and a different approach to life—a completely different faith from that which we may or may not have—and emphasise their right to live by that faith, underpinned by the relevant articles.

Let me say just a few words about human rights. The hon. Member for Stirling mentioned article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, which I will not go through again. There is also article 18 of the international covenant on civil and political rights, which is very similar, and article 9 of the European convention on human rights, which clearly says much the same as well. We have many of these articles worldwide that confirm the right to religious freedom, yet we see it being abused so much all over the world.

I will not repeat what hon. Members have already said about different countries around the world. We should look to ourselves as well. According to data released by the Community Security Trust, a Jewish organisation in the United Kingdom, the number of antisemitic incidents in the UK rose by more than a third to record levels in 2016, and it has risen again since then. I know that the Government will be doing all they can to stop that, but according to the Metropolitan police here in London, the number of hate crimes against Muslims has increased from 343 incidents in 2013 to 1,260 in 2016. The Casey review highlighted just three years ago that at least 55% of the general public believe there is a fundamental clash between Islam and British society values. We all need to work to change that. The Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Lord Ahmad, said in 2017:

“The persecution of individuals based on their religion or belief remains of profound concern to the United Kingdom. The freedom to practise, change or share one’s faith or belief without discrimination or violent opposition is a fundamental human right, and the UK Government are committed to defending this human right and promoting respect and tolerance between religious communities.”—[*Official Report*, 17 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 5P.]

4.2 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for summing up for his party. One of the most important things about this issue is that it should

be considered on a cross-party basis. That is not to say that there will not at times be disagreements about how we go about trying to promote freedom of religious belief, but I am pleased that he made such a strong case on behalf of the Opposition. We need to work together, and I make an open offer to him and to the SNP spokesman: if they want to come to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to learn more about the precise nature of the deep work that is done in this area, I would be only too happy for them to do so. That might be useful, given that we will have many more such debates.

I disagreed with one thing that the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) said. This really is not about the Minister; it is about everyone else. These are Back-Bench debates, and while I shall try to answer the matters raised—please forgive me if I fail to do so; I will take some things up in writing—I have spent long enough on the Back Benches, rather than in a ministerial office, to recognise that it is very important to ensure that everyone has their say, instead of spending too much ministerial time on these issues. The hon. Gentleman also touched on Saudi Arabia, which is slightly outside the main scope of today’s debate, and I do not want to put a foot wrong by giving him incorrect information, so if he will forgive me, I will write to him in detail afterwards.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on marking International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day once again. I am glad for my own good that it is a once-a-year occasion, but I know that, like many Members here, he takes this very seriously, 365 days a year. As ever, I pay great tribute to him and to all members of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief for their tireless and persistent advocacy on this issue around the world. This Saturday, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London and our posts across the globe will be marking the day in a variety of ways, all of which are designed to demonstrate the UK’s steadfast commitment to this fundamental human right.

That commitment is part of our broader policy of defending and promoting universal human rights and freedoms, which are a vital component of the rules-based international system. Freedom and equality must remain the bedrock of democracy, the form of government that we all recognise as delivering security, wellbeing and, hopefully, high levels of prosperity for all citizens. Promoting human rights also goes hand in hand with open markets and free trade, which nurture economic prosperity alongside genuine security and stability. Those are the conditions that ensure that all citizens can enjoy their political rights and freedoms. That is why we remain at the forefront of states that promote universally a culture of respect for human rights. I am very excited at the prospect of having both France and Germany on the Security Council over the next two years, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) pointed out, which will mean having three large, western European nations with great reach across the globe, hopefully being able to make a real impact in this area.

We embrace the work that engages foreign Governments, both bilaterally and in multilateral forums such as the UN Human Rights Council. I reiterate all sentiments about the European Court of Human Rights as an important pillar for ensuring that we move forward correctly. It also invites work on ambitious campaigns on totemic issues: we work on eradicating modern

[Mark Field]

slavery, preventing sexual violence in conflict, and promoting gender equality in all aspects of life, but notably in girls' education—something that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is very committed to. On the back of our own Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here in London, we are working with 52 other nations across the Commonwealth to ensure 12 years of education for all girls around the world.

Let me say a little bit about Lord Ahmad's role—it was brought up, and I feel it is worth touching on. The UK Government remain active at the highest levels, not least within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in standing up for the rights of people of all faiths and of none. The Prime Minister's appointment in July of my noble Friend the Minister for Human Rights as her special envoy on freedom of religion or belief signalled the UK's determination to step up our action to address religious discrimination and to promote mutual understanding and respect. It is important to recognise that the title of Prime Minister's special envoy makes a real difference. It opens a lot of doors for anyone in that role, and it is a respected title across the world.

Lord Ahmad will lead renewed and targeted international efforts on this issue, including by raising awareness of the benefits to society of religious diversity and respect for all faiths and for none, which many Members have mentioned. His first objective is to up the tempo of the UK's response to violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief and to focus on certain countries in particular. As colleagues know, promoting human rights, and specifically advocating for freedom of religion or belief, has long been a focus of the work of our embassies, high commissions and consulates general overseas.

Fiona Bruce: I hope the Minister can tell us whether Lord Ahmad is being provided with any additional resources and staff support to fulfil this additional role, as we have seen in countries such as Canada and, I think, the US. He already has a ministerial role, so what are the Government doing to enhance his support in this additional role?

Mark Field: I was going to come to that, because it was raised by our hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). Let me set out Lord Ahmad's objectives. He will have two additional full-time staff working alongside our diplomatic network and international partners to work across Departments for a step change on freedom of religion or belief within diplomacy, to promote FORB in key countries of concern—obviously those will change from time to time, with their particular circumstances—and to respond effectively to any instances of the suppression of FORB that we are made aware of. I appreciate that there are only two members of staff, but there will be a greater emphasis on that issue in our embassies and high commissions overseas, not least among those who are employed locally.

I have raised the issue of freedom of religious belief on my travels over the past few months—for example, with the Nepalese Prime Minister. I have raised our concerns about the deteriorating human rights situation in Xinjiang with the Chinese Vice Premier. The Foreign Secretary reiterated our concerns about Xinjiang with Chinese state councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi when he visited in July. As hon. Members have said, we

have increasingly grave concerns about the human rights situation in China and the Chinese Government's deepening crackdown. Credible reports have been published recently about re-education camps and widespread surveillance and restrictions targeted at ethnic minorities. That issue has been covered in *The Economist* and elsewhere for some months.

Lord Ahmad has been extremely active in promoting human rights, including the freedom of religion or belief, in Sudan. For example, he expressed our serious concern about the persecution of Christians and the wanton destruction of places of worship. At the recent UN General Assembly in New York, in a meeting we hosted, to which many other countries were invited, he drew attention to the scourge of antisemitism and to the UN report on the crisis in Burma, which concluded that the Burmese military may have inflicted genocide. It has certainly carried out ethnic cleansing and has committed crimes against humanity against the Rohingya.

For the avoidance of any doubt, genocide is a legal term, so my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) will understand that we therefore tend not to use it. We do not wish to downplay the issue, but the term is legal rather than political, and it makes more sense for us to focus on political issues on which we can hold people to account directly.

Fiona Bruce: I thank the Minister for pointing that out. I used the term advisedly in this respect today.

Mark Field: I appreciate that.

Earlier in the year, Lord Ahmad met a range of religious leaders in Israel to discuss their concerns. He also met Yazidi and Christian leaders in Iraq to hear about their experiences and to reiterate the UK's commitment to freedom of religion or belief across Iraq.

A number of hon. Members raised the especially distressing case of Asia Bibi. I assure hon. Members that we have been following the case very closely. I have made plain our views, and will continue to do so as a matter of principle, about the death penalty, let alone for that particular charge, and about the injustices that minorities in Pakistan face. I have made a number of representations to Pakistani authorities at all levels. We are at a highly sensitive moment in that very distressing case, so I am not able to explain publicly what we and international partners are saying privately to the Pakistani authorities.

There are lots of issues to cover, so hon. Members will have to forgive me if there are things that I am unable to cover. If time runs away from me, I will catch up with hon. Members subsequently in writing. The hon. Member for Strangford raised a number of issues that I hope I have already covered. On DFID, we want to work with Lord Ahmad on a cross-governmental basis. I will say a bit more about that later.

I think I have covered the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) raised. I confess that I could not agree more with what he said; it was very refreshing. It makes life easier for us if we can say, "This is not special pleading because there are Christian groups here. The Christian groups want to see the rights of all religious groups upheld. This is a human rights issue first and foremost." That makes our argument so much more powerful. I echo my hon. Friend's very valuable point.

The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) touched on a number of very important issues. The issue of organ harvesting is almost unbelievable. She will understand that, although I am not questioning the reports in any way, we need to get to the bottom of exactly what has happened. She will be aware that, in the past, organs have been harvested from people who have been executed. It is a grisly situation. We remain deeply concerned about the persecution of Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners and others in China simply because of their religious belief. We believe that societies that aim to guarantee freedom of religion are more stable, prosperous and resilient to violent extremism. The very wise words of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford on this matter were right. What have they got to fear? China is moving ahead in the world, including in terms of prosperity. The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston will appreciate why arguments about culture in particular have to be made privately, but please be assured that we do make our concerns felt.

It was interesting that the hon. Lady talked about Kachin and Shan states in Burma, rather than about the Rohingya situation, which has been discussed and on which a huge amount of work is being done in the international community. We are very concerned about the ongoing violence and we do not take the view that that part of Burma is stable and secure. There are human rights concerns, particularly relating to Christians, about those areas, which are run by both the Burmese army and armed ethnic groups. We raised concerns about the treatment of ethnic minorities in Burma, including in Kachin and Shan, in the Human Rights Council in September 2017. The former Foreign Secretary raised the matter during his March 2018 visit to Burma, and the new Foreign Secretary went to Burma and met Aung San Suu Kyi as recently as September this year. I know that all hon. Members will continue to press the Government of Burma on the crucial need for interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance.

The hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) touched on the reports that Pakistani refugees are rounded up and placed in detention centres in Thailand when they are assessed to be of the Ahmadi religion. We are following the recent deterioration in Thailand and will continue to do so. It is particularly sad, because there has been progress in many of these areas in that country in recent years. We understand that there are approximately 100 people, mainly from Pakistan, whom the Thai authorities consider to be illegal immigrants, and this follows arrests of Cambodian and Vietnamese nationals at the end of August. We understand that about 200 people claim refugee and asylum status and are in immigration detention. Some of them are already registered under the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. I am in touch with David Miliband on that matter.

We believe that the recent orders are not aimed at any specific group but apply to anyone the Thai authorities deem to be an illegal visa overstayer, as part of the general tightening of immigration enforcement. In September, a senior official from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office raised our concerns about the treatment of those in immigration detention with the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We will continue to work with the Thai authorities to improve detention

conditions. The hon. Members for St Helens South and Whiston and for Mitcham and Morden will have to forgive me for not saying any more now. If we have more to pass on, we will try to do so in writing, but let us make sure we stay in touch on this issue.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden has been a great advocate for the Ahmadis, and we have discussed the matter previously in the House. As she is aware, Lord Ahmad is of that religion, and she can be assured that he will raise the issue across the globe at every appropriate opportunity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton raised a number of issues. I raised concerns about freedom of religious belief with Nepal's Prime Minister Oli when I met him on 6 May during my visit to Kathmandu. I sought the same sort of assurances that my hon. Friend sought from me on precisely how the penal code was to be enforced, and we made it very clear that we would be very reluctant to see it being used to restrict full freedom of religious practice, especially for religious minorities.

In addition, our embassy in Nepal—we have a tremendous ambassador there in Richard Morris—regularly discusses human rights issues including freedom of religious belief with the Government of Nepal. Nepal does not receive a huge amount of DFID money, which is one of our concerns. We feel that it would be appropriate to have a number of other DFID programmes in Nepal—we have a tremendous historical connection, particularly between the Gurkhas and the Ministry of Defence—but we undertake significant work in that regard.

We have been closely monitoring the legal provision on freedom of religious belief included in the reforms to the national penal code in Nepal. The embassy has heard the concerns of the interfaith council—in fact, I heard them myself at a meeting in early May—about the lack of provision for registering religious organisations and the problems that they face in trying to conduct their day-to-day activities as non-governmental organisations, so we are keeping that under a fairly constant review.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley is a great advocate for Nigeria and has done a tremendous job as a trade envoy there—I know how much work goes into that. I know there is to be a full debate on the situation in Nigeria, for which we will have more evidence, and I suspect it will be either for me or for the Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), to respond to that debate. For now, let me say that the Prime Minister raised the issue with President Buhari during her visit to Nigeria in the summer, and emphasised the need to tackle the crisis through mediation and conciliation—the general community conflict advice. With the wisdom that comes from knowing more about that country, my hon. Friend the Member for Henley was absolutely right to identify that the situation is more than a simple religious issue. It is a little more complicated it might appear, although there are clear religious elements. In her representations, the Prime Minister was clear that the violence must stop while work is done to meet the needs of all affected communities. The Foreign Secretary raised the subject when he wrote to his counterpart in August, and the British high commissioner in Abuja has raised the issue with the Nigerian vice-president, with President Buhari's chief of staff, and with a number of other governors of affected states.

[Mark Field]

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). He spoke about a number of issues, some of which I have touched on, namely the concerns about DFID funding and the Yazidis in Iraq.

I know we are running out of time, so I will finish by stressing that this is not just an issue for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. One of the most important things I do in much of my work on matters ranging from climate change to international energy policy or cyber-security, is recognise that one of the great strengths of our sometimes much-maligned system of government—we are perhaps a little too self-deprecating about it—is the international reach of our Foreign and Commonwealth Office through the number of posts that it has across the world. We feel that it is important to take the UK's work on religious freedom forward—it is very much a “One HMG” effort, as we put it. For example, the Department for International Development has increased its own engagement on the issue, which I think is very important, although it is a probably a step too far at the moment for development aid to be contingent on money coming through for that sort of work, as one or two of my hon. Friends were suggesting.

I am always struck by the fact DFID money goes to help some of the most vulnerable people. For example, we have had strong difficulties with Cambodia. We have tried to engage, but I think that, for example, paring back our funding for demining on the basis that we had disagreements about press freedom in Cambodia would have been the wrong step to take. By staying committed to a range of development and aid work, we can at least keep some sort of dialogue going, even if we might disapprove of that Government's actions. That begins to build a degree of trust, and we can start moving in the right direction in other areas.

Although I understand the points rightly made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford, ending that assistance would be a retrograde step. If we get the development issues right and recognise that development is an integral part of a state's recovery—that notion applies to Pakistan in particular, which is the single biggest recipient of DFID funds—we can hope that having a piece of the action in that respect buys us a place at the table to continue to make plain representations and achieve movement in the right direction. We should not hold out huge hopes in all individual cases, but I will take on board the important concerns expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and make sure that they are passed back to Islamabad.

Jeremy Lefroy: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me but I am worried about running out of time, and I know that the hon. Member for Strangford will also want to get a word in at the end.

DFID's wider programme is also designed to benefit religious minorities. As I touched on, in Iraq some £237.5 million in humanitarian support has helped Christians, Yazidis and other minorities who have been forced to flee persecution by Daesh. At the Foreign Office, we have also increased our support for freedom of religion or belief through the Magna Carta fund to over £1 million. That will fund projects in countries such as Burma, Indonesia, Iraq and Sudan.

Respect in education is a key element of our freedom of religion or belief strategy. Children are not born prejudiced; sadly, prejudice is learned. It does not have to be that way, and we believe that more should be done in schools to ensure that children remain as open minded as possible and respectful of difference. As the hon. Member for Leeds North East rightly said, respect is the operative word here. We believe that it is not simply enough to promote tolerance; indeed, that word alone suggests a begrudging acceptance. We plan to create a step-by-step guide for teachers and schools around the world to draw them into best practice and help them foster greater respect for different faiths and beliefs.

Naturally, learning does not end at school, and colleagues may recall that when we last debated this issue, I mentioned our efforts to increase religious literacy across the civil service. I am sure that hon. Members will be pleased to know that our collaboration with the LSE Faith Centre is proving extremely popular, and annual faith and diplomacy courses for staff across Whitehall are now very well attended. In addition to such projects and initiatives, we continue to promote the issue internationally with our bilateral advocacy. We work with like-minded partners as well as with civil society across the globe.

The UK Government remain absolutely convinced of the key importance of freedom of religion or belief, not just because it is a basic human right, but because it goes hand in hand with all the other rights and democratic freedoms that make up the foundations of a fair, stable and successful society. That is why my ministerial colleagues and I are committed to promoting and protecting freedom of religion, and I am so pleased that that applies to Parliament more widely. I thank everyone for their contributions. Through Government, we shall work and strive for a better world—a world in which there is greater mutual understanding and respect, where everyone is able to practise their faith or to hold no faith at all, and to live the life that they choose.

4.29 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his energy and deep interest in the subject of our debate, and for the steps that he and his Department have taken, which we all acknowledge. I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), and all right hon. and hon. Members for their insight and powerful contributions.

Today, this Chamber has been a place where a voice for the voiceless was heard. I will finish with the words of a man of faith and a scriptural text pertinent to the debate, 2 Corinthians 4:8-9:

“We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.”

I thank the Minister and all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to a debate that will mean much to people whom we may never met, but who greatly value what we can do for them in this House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered international freedom of religion or belief day 2018.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 25 October 2018

ATTORNEY GENERAL

CPS: Reappointment of Chief Inspector

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): I am today announcing the reappointment of Kevin McGinty CBE as the Chief Inspector of HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate for a further two years. Mr McGinty was appointed in April 2015 for four years and his contract was due to finish on 31 March 2019.

The Prime Minister has been notified of this reappointment. Also, this role is subject to scrutiny by the Justice Select Committee. The Committee, to which I am most grateful has been consulted and fully supports the reappointment.

[HCWS1032]

CABINET OFFICE

Cabinet Committees and Implementation Task Forces

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Today I am publishing the updated list of Cabinet Committees and implementation task forces (ITFs).

The updated list includes a new National Security Council (Cross-Government Funds) Sub-Committee, which will provide strategic direction to the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund and the Prosperity Fund.

Copies of the associated documents will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cabinet-committees-system-and-list-of-cabinet-committees>

[HCWS1035]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Exit

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): Section 18 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 conferred a legal obligation for a Minister of the Crown to lay before both Houses of Parliament a statement in writing outlining the steps taken by Her Majesty's Government to seek to negotiate an agreement, as part of the framework for the United Kingdom's future relationship with the EU, for the United Kingdom to participate in a customs arrangement with the EU, before 31 October 2018.

The Government published a White Paper earlier this year setting out their proposal for the UK's future relationship with the EU, including a new customs arrangement. The UK proposed the establishment of a free trade area for goods that would avoid friction at the border, protect jobs and livelihoods, and ensure that the UK and the EU could meet their commitments to Northern Ireland and Ireland through the overall future relationship. The new customs arrangement would support

this by removing the need for customs checks and controls at the border between the UK and the EU, while allowing the UK to forge new trading relationships with partners around the world.

The UK would apply the EU's tariffs and trade policy for goods intended for the EU, and the UK's tariffs and trade policy for goods intended for the UK. Mirroring the EU's customs approach at its external border would ensure that goods entering the EU via the UK have complied with EU customs processes and the correct EU duties have been paid. This would include the UK maintaining a common customs rulebook with the EU. It would remove the need for customs declarations, routine requirements for rules of origin, and entry and exit summary declarations. Together with the wider free trade area, the new customs arrangement would preserve frictionless trade for the majority of UK goods trade, and reduce frictions for UK trade with the rest of the world through a range of unilateral and bilateral facilitations. The UK's goal is to facilitate the greatest possible trade, whether with the EU or the rest of the world. There would need to be a phased approach to implementation of the model.

The UK recognises that this approach would need to be consistent with the integrity of the EU's customs union and that the EU would need to be confident that goods cannot enter its customs territory without the correct tariff and trade policy being applied. To that end, the UK proposed that where a good reached the UK border and the destination could not be robustly demonstrated at the point of import, it would pay the higher of the UK or EU tariff. Where the goods destination was later identified to be in the lower tariff jurisdiction, it would be eligible for a repayment from the UK Government equal to the difference between the two tariffs. The UK proposed agreeing with the EU a new trusted trader scheme to allow firms to pay the correct tariff at the UK border without needing to engage with the repayment mechanism. Both sides would need to agree the circumstances in which repayments could be granted, which is most likely to be relevant to intermediate goods. The UK also proposed agreeing a mechanism with the EU for the remittance of relevant tariff revenue, such as a tariff revenue formula, taking account of goods destined for the UK entering via the EU and goods destined for the EU entering via the UK.

To ensure that new declarations and border checks between the UK and the EU do not need to be introduced for VAT and excise purposes, the UK also proposed the application of common cross-border processes and procedures for VAT and excise, as well as some administrative co-operation and information exchange to underpin risk-based enforcement. These common processes and procedures would apply to the trade in goods, small parcels and to individuals travelling with goods (including alcohol and tobacco) for personal use.

The UK's proposal is designed to make the arrangements as simple as possible for those who need to use them, and the UK would continue to explore options to use future advancements in technology to streamline the process.

As the Prime Minister set out in her update to the House of Commons on 22 October 2018, *Official Report*, column 46, we have made good progress in negotiations with the EU on both the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration on our future relationship. On the

political declaration on our future relationship, the UK and the EU have discussed each element of the UK's proposals, including the future customs arrangement. The UK will continue to work with the European Union on finalising the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration on our future relationship and, as set out in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the House of Commons must vote to approve that deal before the withdrawal agreement can be ratified.

[HCWS1031]

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 on 16 October in Luxembourg. A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union's website at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2018/10/16/>

Preparation of October European Council

The Council discussed the draft conclusions for the European Council meeting on 18 October at which leaders from the 28 EU states discussed migration, internal security and external relations.

Ministers were content with the conclusions text on migration. I stated that the UK viewed the text as being balanced and welcomed the focus on developing operational outcomes. I also welcomed the intention to tackle people-smuggling networks and monitor and disrupt their online communications.

On internal security, I welcomed the references to the attack in Salisbury in March and the attempted cyber-attack carried out against the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in April. I called for the acceleration of work to establish a cyber toolkit capable of responding to malicious cyber-attacks through restrictive measures.

Following Ministers' discussions, the European Council discussed external relations, including the EU-Africa partnership and the upcoming summit between the 28 EU member states with the League of Arab States on 24 and 25 February 2019.

Rule of law in Poland

The Commission updated the Council on the most recent developments regarding the rule of law in Poland. The Commission called for a further hearing at a future meeting of the Council. In previous discussions on this matter, the UK has intervened to highlight the importance of the rule of law. Consequently, I did not intervene on this occasion.

Respect for EU values in Hungary

The presidency provided the Council with an update on the next procedural steps following the European Parliament's triggering of the article 7(1) treaty on European Union (TEU) procedure for Hungary. This was the first GAC at which Ministers had considered the article 7(1) TEU process against Hungary and I intervened to reaffirm the value that the UK places on the importance of the rule of law.

Multiannual financial framework

The presidency provided the Council with an assessment of the latest position in the ongoing multiannual financial framework discussions.

[HCWS1036]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sexual Exploitation in the Aid Sector

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Following my oral statement of 20 February and my written ministerial statements of

20 March and 17 May, I am updating the House on the outcomes of the international summit that I hosted in London on 18 October, Putting People First: Tackling Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment in the Aid Sector.

The aims of the summit

Last week's summit followed the event on 5 March which I co-hosted with the Charity Commission and where I announced new, enhanced safeguarding standards for the organisations DFID works with. The 18 October summit was attended by over 500 participants and focused on driving up the safeguarding standards of organisations worldwide who work in the international aid sector.

Aid must be delivered in a way which does no harm. If not, we will have failed in our duty to protect the most vulnerable. We must deter wrongdoing and hold perpetrators to account. This includes enabling prosecutions by law enforcement agencies if justified.

This work is driven by four things: our determination to prevent incidents of sexual exploitation, sexual abuse and sexual harassment from happening in the aid sector in the first place; to listen to those who are affected when it does occur; to respond robustly but sensitively; and to learn from every case.

The summit helped provide a focus for the work driven by the UK since February. Our major partners were asked to attend the summit with concrete practical actions which will bring about significant changes. I am pleased that many of them rose to the challenge.

Donors (representing over 90% of global official development assistance in 2017), the United Nations, international financial institutions, CDC (the UK's development finance institution) and representatives of around 500 major British NGOs, contractors and research organisations each presented commitments. In total, there were eight separate sets of collective commitments.

Each document stated what that group of organisations will do to achieve four long-term fundamental changes—or strategic shifts—to fundamentally rewrite the way the aid sector operates, from root to branch:

- Ensure support for survivors, victims and whistleblowers; enhance accountability and transparency; strengthen reporting; and tackle impunity;

- Incentivise cultural change through strong leadership, organisational accountability and better human resource processes;

- Adopt global standards and ensure they are met or exceeded; and

- Strengthen organisational capacity and capability across the international aid sector to meet these standards.

Specific initiatives unveiled at the summit

Measures announced to help deliver the four shifts included:

- a new international vetting scheme for aid workers led by Interpol, to be piloted over five years with DFID funding, to deter abusers from entering the sector and to identify and arrest them quickly if they do;

- UK NGOs with support from DFID will test a "passport" for aid workers to prove an individual's identity, provide background information on their previous employment and vetting status;

- a new disclosure of misconduct scheme across the NGO sector to prevent known perpetrators moving around undetected—organisations with over 50,000 staff have already signed up, and I expect the coverage to increase significantly in the months ahead;

agreement among 22 major donors on common global safeguarding standards which organisations must meet if they want to receive funding from those donors;

a resource and support hub funded by DFID to help smaller organisations understand and meet those standards, including access to specialist investigators;

all donors and other participants committed to have at least one named senior level champion accountable for work on safeguarding issues and to encourage annual discussions of safeguarding at board level as well as the recruitment and career development of women throughout organisations;

DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will support the development of a United Nations statement of victims' rights to allow people to understand their rights, and to have confidence that they can find help if those rights are threatened or violated; and

the Disasters Emergency Committee to test shared reporting hotlines for raising concerns in future emergencies, along with a review of how they respond to community feedback.

Next steps to ensure delivery

The measures agreed will help to deliver root-and-branch change in the way the aid sector approaches safeguarding issues. They send a powerful message to any individuals who might look to exploit power imbalances and the vulnerability of those who the aid sector is there to help. They also send a powerful message that survivors and victims' voices must be heard.

In the interests of transparency and accountability the sets of commitments made by the UK with 21 other donors, and those made by our major domestic and international partners can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/safeguarding-summit-2018>. A fuller outcome summary is available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-summit-2018-hosts-outcome-summary> along with other key documents from the day. My Department will continue to report on progress via its annual report to Parliament.

This remains a long-term agenda requiring leadership and culture change. That is why donors agreed to meet no later than October 2019 to assess progress on their commitments, while continuing to liaise regularly to keep up the pace of progress and share lessons. Donors also agreed to support the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to formulate a new DAC instrument that in 2019 will set standards on preventing and managing the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse in development co-operation, and drive donor accountability in meeting them. The 12 commitments to change in the UK NGO document presented to the summit will become part of the Bond Charter, which forms the common vision, purpose, values and principles of the Bond network covering more than 420 international development and humanitarian organisations. Other commitment documents include similar tools for tracking progress.

The summit galvanised the whole sector and provided a framework which was previously lacking to drive further progress. I will continue to ensure this issue remains a focus across the international system as there is still much work to do. But the summit was a key moment to say "No more" and to deliver some of the practical tools to give the people that the aid sector is here to help the protection that they need.

[HCWS1033]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Trade Envoys to Tanzania and Kenya

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Prime Minister has approved two new appointments to the trade envoy programme. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) has been appointed as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Kenya and my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Tanzania. These new appointments take the total number to 33 parliamentarians covering 63 markets. The Prime Minister's trade envoy programme is an unpaid and voluntary cross-party network, which supports the UK's ambitious trade and investment agenda in global markets.

[HCWS1030]

World Trade Organisation Update

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): I am pleased to announce to the House that following the circulation of our goods schedule at the World Trade Organisation in Geneva, the period for certification has ended. As expected, some trading partners have expressed reservations about our proposed treatment of tariff rate quotas (TRQs). I am therefore announcing today that the UK intends to enter negotiations with relevant partners under article XXVIII of the general agreement on tariffs and trade. The notification to formally invite claims in that process is now being prepared. Through the article XXVIII process the aim is to reach a mutually satisfactory conclusion that maintains the balance of rights and obligations for the UK and our trading partners.

[HCWS1034]

JUSTICE

Justice Programme: Opt-in Decision

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Government have decided not to opt in to a proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and the Council establishing a justice programme.

The justice programme aims to support judicial co-operation in civil and criminal matters, promote judicial training and facilitate access to justice. It forms part of the justice, rights and values fund within the proposals for the EU's new multiannual financial framework, the EU's budget for the period 2021-27. The proposal has a justice and home affairs legal base, and so the UK must take an opt-in decision under title V of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union.

Given that the justice programme will run from January 2021 to December 2027, the UK will have left the EU and come to the end of any anticipated implementation period (which would conclude in December 2020) before the programme comes into effect. The European Commission has therefore drafted the regulation establishing the

programme on the basis that the UK will not be able to participate as an EU member state, as it will no longer be part of the European Union. Opting in to the proposal would not automatically allow us to participate in the justice programme when it comes into effect, but it would allow the UK to have a vote on the proposals until March 2019 and potentially influence its development. If we wanted to join the programme after leaving the EU, we would need to negotiate with the European Commission to do so as a third country.

The UK did not opt in to the existing justice programme running from 2014-20. It was considered that the benefits to the UK from the programme (in terms of receiving funding for UK organisations to carry out activities under the programme) did not outweigh its costs to the Government.

Given these reasons, the Government have concluded that it is not in the national interest to opt in to the justice programme.

[HCWS1037]

Petition

Thursday 25 October 2018

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Home Education: draft guidance and the consultation

The petition of residents of the Cotswolds,

Declare that the “Home Education—Call for Evidence and revised DfE guidance” has been written following significant consultation with local authorities and no consultation whatsoever with the home education community; further that the consultation is consequently

for little more than show as an intention to implement the content has already been stated: further that it seeks to encourage local authorities to breach the ECHR Article 8 and the GDPR; and further that the report provides no accessible means for a parent to address ultra vires behaviour by their local authority, where many of those authorities already act routinely in an ultra vires manner.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to withdraw the draft guidance and the consultation, until it has put in place an accessible and workable complaints procedure and further has consulted with home educating parents, as it has with Local Authorities, what the contents should include.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.*]

[P002278]

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